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MARCH/APRIL 2025

Funworld

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WOMEN WHO WOW

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Vekoma Rides CEO Anne-Mart Agerbeek reflects on one year of leadership

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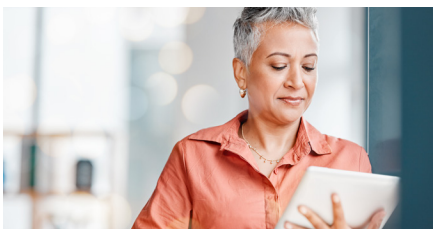

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WARNER BROS. MOVIE WORLD, AUSTRALIA

FAMILY BOOMERANG RACER ‘KANSAS TWISTER’
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NEW 2025 - TILT COASTER ‘SIREN’S CURSE’
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Rope Drop

Feel the Rush

Eureka! Six Flags Over Georgia plans to strike gold with the new Georgia Gold Rusher, slated to debut in mid-March. Designed by Intamin, riders will sit aboard two outward-facing discs that rotate while the ride vehicle creates a splash effect. The ride vehicle will launch between two towers standing 144 feet tall. The investment is part of Six Flags' renewal of the guest experience that focuses on park décor, storytelling, and enhancements to dining and retail areas. Georgia Gold Rusher will bring the park's coaster count to 13.

SIX FLAGS

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Launch

The exterior of the new Danse Macabre at Efteling appears mysterious, shrouding a new ride experience inside.

EFTELING

THEME PARKS

Dancing in the Dark

Efteling delivers a virtuoso performance with Danse Macabre

by Juliana Gilling

EFTELING'S DANSE MACABRE RIDE IS A DARKLY THRILLING ADDITION to the Netherlands park's pantheon of themed attraction greats. After saying goodbye to the beloved Spookslot haunted castle attraction, which opened in 1978, Efteling's team decided the famously haunting 19th-century melody composed by Camille Saint-Saëns, "Danse Macabre" should be retained to take center stage in Efteling's latest attraction. "We wanted our visitors to dance to the music," says lead designer Jeroen Verheij.

Danse Macabre is a whirling wonder—an immersive thrill ride that "frightens visitors the Efteling way." The attraction is a symphony of innovative ride and show technologies, spectacular set designs, audio-visual and special effects, and spine-tingling music. Composer René Merkelbach's new version of "Danse Macabre," recorded with the largest orchestra in Efteling's history, envelops guests in its spell.

The attraction spins the story of conductor Joseph Charlatan's orchestra who vanished on Friday the 13th, 1876, after performing "Danse Macabre." They fell prey to "The Unnameable," a supernatural cat-like beast that roams the surrounding area. Guests who venture into the imposing, 20-meter-high chapel located in the creepiest part of Efteling will see a paranormal performance. →

EFTELING

Efteling's team collaborated with Intamin to create a custom ride system with balletic movements that mimics the "Danse Macabre" music. Intamin's Dynamic Motion Stage technology recreates the waltz's rises, falls, and twirls. The ride system incorporates an 18-meter-wide turntable, topped by six choir stalls (each seating 18 guests) that rest on six smaller turntables. The large turntable can rise three meters high, tilt, drop, and spin. The theatrical experience lasts for 3.5 minutes as the music builds to a crescendo inside the elaborately decorated chamber.

The ride accommodates 108 passengers and has a theoretical capacity of 1,253 people per hour. Guests must be 1.2 meters tall to ride and the attraction has an advisory age of eight years.

Efteling has worked closely with organizations that support disability inclusion to ensure Danse Macabre is as accessible as possible. Visitors with disabilities can experience the waiting route with their companions. The attraction is accessible for wheelchair users who can walk independently when transferring to the ride. If this is not possible, visitors can take their seats in the chapel or move to a different room for an alternative experience. They can enjoy the show's sounds, visuals, and effects simultaneously, allowing them to share in the excitement.

Danse Macabre is set in a fully realized fantasy world, the Huyverwoud Forest. "Efteling has, for the first time, created a deeper thematic experience in hospitality, retail, and entertainment in one go," Verheij says. "We have succeeded in making the entire area completely immersive." Staff members—in artfully distressed outfits partly made from discarded Efteling uniforms—bring the drama to life. Efteling's investment in the new themed area totaled around €35 million.

"The whole area around Danse Macabre was designed with great respect for, and inspired by, the old haunted house's iconic building," Verheij adds. Eagle-eyed guests will spot Spookslot's relics, references, and Easter eggs as they are led on a merry dance through the waiting area. They pass forest paths, cloisters, and graveyards, before arriving at the chapel and catacombs for the ride. Atmospheric lighting enhances the Danse Macabre building at night.

The project took two years to complete and spans 17,000 square meters. Building the major attraction and themed area while the park operated was a demanding task.

"A unique ride system comes with challenges, but fortunately all the pieces of the puzzle fell into place," Verheij says. "Our technicians had to write and invent the manual for this new ride themselves. In addition, programming the ride system in combination with the show experience was a huge job. Every time the ride system was adjusted, the show experience also had to be timed accordingly. Our people spent a lot of hours on that, but the end result is thrilling and beautiful." FW

INSIGHT IN FUNWORLD: Learn how to create a compliant and effective training manual. See p. 24.

EFTELING

1 DEVELOPMENT
KALAHARI'S GROWTH **ROARS**

Following expansion projects totaling $26 million in 2024 across its Pocono Mountains, Wisconsin Dells, and Sandusky resorts, **Kalahari Resorts & Conventions** is again expanding. A new $85 million, 75,000-square-foot indoor water park expansion in Wisconsin Dells will feature a glass-enclosed structure with a retractable roof. Inside, three new water slides will join a new zero-depth entry pool—complete with tanning ledges, a children's pool, and an adult swim-up bar set to open in 2026.

KALAHARI

"My wife and I opened the first Kalahari Resorts in the Dells 24 years ago, and it's been an incredible journey," says **Todd Nelson**, CEO, owner, and founder of Kalahari Resorts. "We're excited to expand our offerings and invite even more families to experience the spirit of togetherness," he says. Both Nelson and his wife Shari were born and raised in Wisconsin Dells.

Meanwhile, Kalahari's fifth resort is under construction in Spotsylvania County, Virginia, and slated for a 2026 opening.

2 RIBBON CUTTINGS

OFF TO SEE **THE WIZARD**

Guests can now follow the Yellow Brick Road to **The Wizard of Oz** precinct at **Warner Bros. Movie World** in Queensland, Australia. The new land features immersive scenes from the film and two new family-friendly roller coasters. **Kansas Twister** is a twin shuttle coaster, while **Flight of the Wicked Witch** is a suspended family coaster—both from **Vekoma.** Each is designed for high-capacity ridership and a safe minimum height requirement.

VILLAGE ROADSHOW

FORE-WARD **THINKING**

Five new rides are headed to family-owned **Fun Spot America Theme Parks** in 2025. **Hook & Slice**, a golf-themed Mini Reverse Time model by **SBF-Visa Group**, became the first to open in February at Fun Spot's Atlanta property. "This is a huge investment for Fun Spot America," says Fun Spot CEO **John Arie Jr.** Two additional rides will open at Fun Spot's Orlando and Kissimmee locations later this year.

FUN SPOT

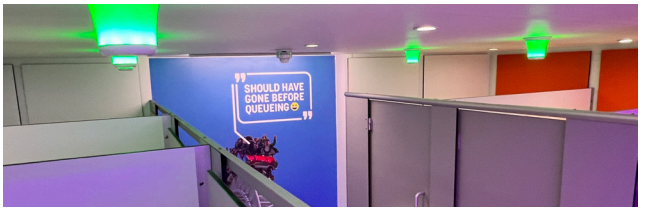
LAUNCHING IN **POLAND**

Indoor amusement park **Mandoria** in Rzgów, Poland, inaugurated **Aquila** in January, a **Vekoma** family launch coaster reaching 70 km/h. Aquila's height requirement of 95 cm allows young children to safely ride while increasing the capacity of the facility that first opened in 2021. Still in expansion mode, Mandoria plans to install a dark ride and open a new outdoor complex in the years ahead.

VEKOMA

3 GUEST SERVICE
WHEN YOU GOTTA GO

Talk about sparkling clean. **Thorpe Park**, located west of London, completed a stunning renovation of "the loo" that includes a modern touch. The water closets on the Dome's lower level now include **LooLights**, a smart cubicle occupancy system. A product of **WhiffAway**, cutting edge sensors help guests quickly identify an open toilet using red and green lights. Simultaneously, proprietary software reports traffic levels to operators, helping to ensure a clean restroom experience.



SCOTT FAIS

4 SUSTAINABILITY
WASTE NOT

Behind the scenes at each of the five **Xcaret** parks in Cancun and Riviera Maya, employees are empowered to participate in a prominent recycling program.

1. Adding initiatives to the corporate sustainability framework.

2. The above is accomplished by developing and implementing internal regulations—from management to operational staff on the frontlines.

3. Xcaret used internal and guest-facing channels to raise awareness and provide reminders to the significance of effective waste management.

4. The attraction operator provides ongoing and targeted training to strengthen waste separation processes by area, such as kitchens, maintenance areas, and in general service spaces.

XCARET

5 SPECIAL EVENTS
PLANNING THE ULTIMATE FOOD FESTIVAL

As winter turns into spring, **SeaWorld Orlando** presents the **Seven Seas Food Festival,** an annual four month attraction for the tastebuds. With more than 120 beverages and 70 limited-time culinary offerings spread across 18 huts, Executive Sous Chef **Jose Vargas** tells Funworld the key to a respectful food and beverage (F&B) event is offering a mix of old favorites and new tastes.

"We're looking at numbers. The top 10 and 20 [dishes] we keep on. Then we go middle tier items and ask, 'Can we reimagine it? Can we do a different sauce?'" Vargas says of conversations held in a test kitchen.

SCOTT FAIS
Vargas

He notes that in 2025, limoncellos and mocktails are trending, while lobster mac and cheese and dishes using chicken tenders retain their popularity.

Here are four best practices Vargas says attractions should use when operating a successful F&B event:

SCOTT FAIS

1 Use colorful signage with beauty shots that illustrate menu items. SeaWorld menu boards illuminate at night.

TYLER WORTHINGTON

2 Print pocket guides listing menu items—and include a map that directs guests to each F&B location.

SCOTT FAIS

3 Invite influencers and bloggers to sample the event. In return, ask them to share favorites with their audience.

SCOTT FAIS

4 Place pictorial "spec sheets" in each remote kitchen depicting how chefs should expertly reproduce each dish.

HAVE A DISPATCH FROM THE FIELD?

Have a Dispatch from the field? Share your 2025 successes, wins, and innovations with Funworld. Send news and photos to **FunworldWorks@IAAPA.org**

IANYA DISPLAY

New Dome-Style Flying Theater in China

Visitors to Hetou Old Street Scenic Spot in Tangshan, Hebei province in China, can now experience a state-of-the-art 5D dome theater, offering a thrilling aerial journey over the region's most famous landmarks.

Known as Flyover Hebei, the flying theater seats up to 45 guests inside a 17-meter-high dome. A 16-meter spherical screen, powered by eight Christie 4K10-HS laser projectors, delivers stunning 6K visuals. Travelers traverse 11 cities and 20 landmarks, including the breathtaking Shanhaiguan Pass, historic Chengde Mountain Resort, and China's Great Wall.

Developed by Tangshan Kaigeer Industrial in collaboration with Shenzhen Guandu Technology, the attraction features six-axis motion seats, sensory effects, and 7.2-channel surround sound.

Access to the flying theater is included with admission to Hetou Old Street, which is built at the intersection of two canals and colorfully lit at night.

Ocean Park Hong Kong Plans 2028 Expansion

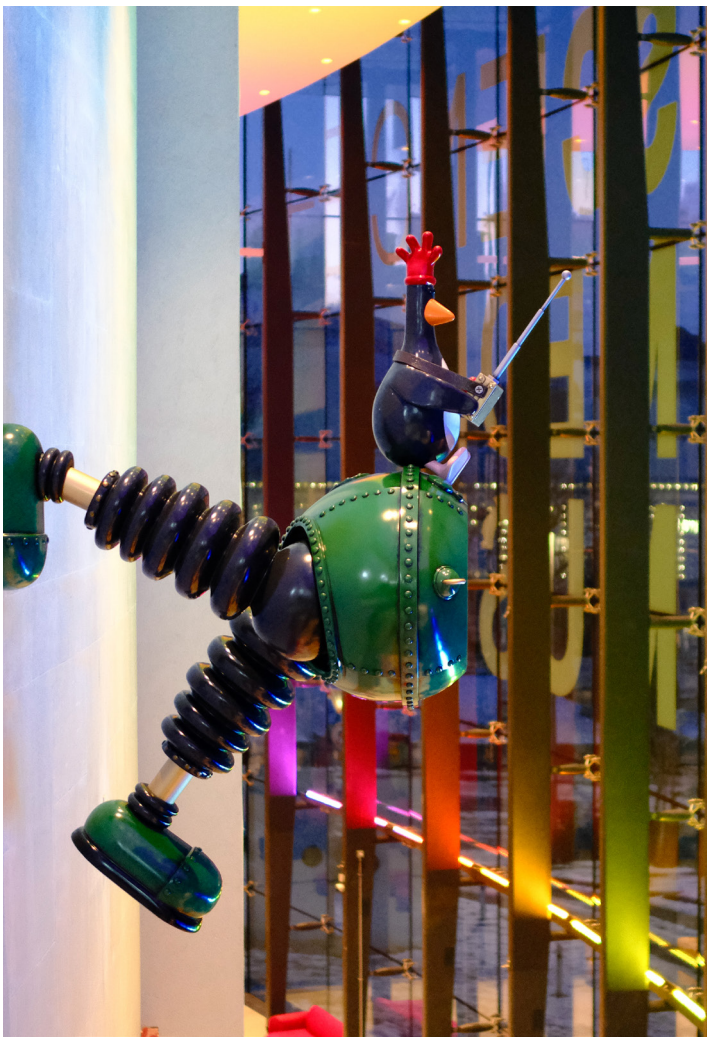
Guests visiting Ocean Park Hong Kong will scale new peaks in 2028. The park will transform its summit and back hillside into a 120,000-square-meter adventure zone, offering thrilling activities and stunning views of the South China Sea. Developed in collaboration with Shun Tak Group and AJ Hackett International, the new zone is set to open as a separate gated attraction in mid-2028 and is part of the park's HK$6.8 billion redevelopment plan.

The sky park reimagines existing infrastructure, such as the former Mine Train's roller coaster dome, and will feature twin 30-meter bungee jumps and giant swings, two 1,000-meter-long ziplines, an alpine coaster luge, and three dry slides. Additional highlights include climbing walls, water play areas, and ropes courses.

The redevelopment "affirms our strategy of fully leveraging geographical advantage and natural scenery," says Ocean Park Chairman Paulo Pong. "We are confident that the Adventure Zone will broaden our visitor base and enhance market competitiveness."

oceanpark.com.hk

OCEAN PARK HONG KONG



NATIONAL SCIENCE AND MEDIA MUSEUM

Wallace & Gromit Generate Mischief at UK Museum

Wallace & Gromit's nemesis, Feathers McGraw, provides a perfect selfie moment at the newly reopened National Science and Media Museum in Bradford, England. In a playful nod to the Wallace & Gromit movie, "The Wrong Trousers," the villainous penguin uses robotic trousers to scale the museum's revamped foyer. Wallace & Gromit's creator, Aardman animation studio, crafted the model for the museum.

The museum partnered with Aardman for A Grand Day Out to mark the reopening. The weekend event included Wallace & Gromit movie screenings, model-making, live science shows, and object handling. Museum director Jo Quinton-Tulloch says she is delighted to welcome visitors back into the building as Bradford is granted the yearlong UK City of Culture designation in 2025.

"With newly transformed spaces, improved accessibility, and exciting additions to our public program, it marks the beginning of an extraordinary journey for both the museum and our community. As the year unfolds, we will unveil more exciting improvements to the museum, culminating in the summer with the launch of our spectacular Sound and Vision galleries," Quinton-Tulloch says. The Sound and Vision project represents a £6 million investment.

scienceandmediamuseum.org.uk

Austria's Swarovski Kristallwelten Marks 30 Sparkling Years

Swarovski Kristallwelten (Swarovski Crystal Worlds) in Wattens, Austria, began its 30th anniversary year with a bang. In Pulse Voronoi, its newest and largest Chamber of Wonder room, guests find themselves surrounded by 7,000 sparkling crystals that have magically exploded in midair. The biometric light and sound installation can also pulse along with visitors' heartbeats.

"By engaging with the sensors in the Chamber of Wonder, you can add your own heartbeat. The rhythm of your heart is made visible and audible, and it's then stored inside of a crystal," explains Stefan Isser, managing director of D. Swarovski Tourism Services.

Pulse Voronoi is one of two new Chambers of Wonder created by artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, who fuses technology and data in imaginative light installations.

Swarovski's global employees share their stories in a second new Chamber of Wonder named Kristallstimmen.

Swarovski Kristallwelten will "celebrate a year of joy in 2025," offering crystal-inspired experiences and activities for the whole family during the Easter and summer holidays. The destination will debut another Chamber of Wonder in May.

"Constant renewal is an important facet of our DNA," Isser says.

kristallwelten.swarovski.com

Jumeirah Al Qasr Elevates Dining in Dubai

Balloons at the Palace is a new pop-up dining attraction at the Jumeirah Al Qasr hotel, featuring hot air balloon-inspired pods where diners can enjoy panoramic views of Dubai's skyline.

"By combining imaginative design with world-class culinary offerings, Balloons at the Palace invites guests to explore new dimensions of dining in an intimate and enchanting setting," says Peter Roth, regional vice president of Madinat Jumeirah resort.

Guests can embark on a global culinary voyage in the whimsical four-seat baskets through April. Jumeirah Al Qasr offers two tempting food and beverage options each Wednesday – Sunday. They include an afternoon tea and a five-course dinner (prices range from AED 295 to AED 445 per person, respectively). Afternoon Tea in the Sky is a quintessential English experience with treats including Pimm's Royal Sorbet, smoked salmon with lemon and dill cream cheese on rye, and freshly baked scones with clotted cream. The dinner fuses flavors from France, Italy, Thailand, the Levant, and Canada. Dishes include sea bass carpaccio with lemon, Ravioli del Plin, Lon Goong, and maple-glazed beef tenderloin.

jumeirah.com

JUMEIRAH AL QASR

Formula Rossa Reopens at Abu Dhabi's Ferrari World

Formula is hitting top gear again after a refurbishment at Ferrari World Yas Island, Abu Dhabi. The park reopened the record-breaking coaster in late 2024. Guests can again experience a thrill as Formula Rossa speeds up to 240 kph in under five seconds.

The Intamin-designed roller coaster, which first opened in 2010, stayed closed for a pit stop for much of 2024 before roaring back into the pole position.

"Our technical experts conduct comprehensive maintenance, perform detailed inspections, and carry out rigorous safety checks to ensure all rides meet the highest standards," shares Faisal Al Nuaimi, general manager of Ferrari World Yas Island, Abu Dhabi, about the proactive maintenance performed on the famed roller coaster.

As a guest service, the park posts ride-availability updates on their webpage, sharing upcoming maintenance dates with future visitors.

ferrariworldabudhabi.com

FERRARI WORLD YAS ISLAND, ABU DHABI

LOS GLACIARES NATIONAL PARK

National Park in Argentina Welcomes Suspended Walkways

The National Parks Administration of Argentina has unveiled 350 meters of walkways in Los Glaciares National Park, located in the southern province of Santa Cruz. Opened to the public in December 2024, the suspended paths improve access to the De Agostini overlook while offering breathtaking views of Spegazzini Glacier.

The inauguration ceremony was attended by key National Parks Administration leadership, along with local and national authorities, business representatives, and community members. Following remarks, officials performed a ribbon-cutting ceremony to officially open the new walkways, overlook, and visitor center.

Donated by Solo Patagonia, a local company offering glacial sailings within the park, the walkways are located along the shores of Lago Argentino and provide guests with a more accessible route to experience one of Argentina's most iconic landscapes. This initiative strengthens El Calafate's position as a key gateway for exploring the natural wonders of the Patagonia region.

solopatagonia.com

New Interactive Center Christened with Tequila in Mexico

Guadalajara, Mexico, gains Tequila Lab, a cutting-edge facility dedicated to exploring the past, present, and future of Mexico's staple spirit. Designed to highlight tequila's cultural, economic, and global significance, the new immersive museum invites visitors to dive deep into the world of Mexico's first product with a protected geographical indication.

Created by the Tequila Regulatory Council in partnership with the Jalisco Network of Museums, Galleries, and Exhibitions, Tequila Lab combines cultural exploration and business innovation. The newly inaugurated space features interactive experiences including holograms, audiovisual projections, and an olfactory (smell) lab.

In addition to workshops and exhibits that celebrate the craftsmanship and heritage of this spirit, the museum sports more than 2,400 different bottles of local tequila on display. Located in Zapopan, part of the Guadalajara Metropolitan Area, Tequila Lab is open Tuesday to Sunday. Tickets cost MX$150 for adults and MX$75 for children, seniors, and individuals with disabilities.

tequilalab.com.mx

LUNA PARK

A New Era for Luna Park Sydney in Australia

Luna Park in Sydney has a new owner. The Oscars Group, one of New South Wales' largest privately owned hospitality companies, has purchased the iconic attraction from global investment firm Brookfield for an undisclosed sum.

"Our goal is to further establish Luna Park as a top-five tourist destination whilst also promoting it as an entertainment precinct for Sydneysiders," says Oscars Group Managing Director Bill Gravanis, whose family-run business owns more than 45 venues.

The park, which recently underwent an A$40 million renovation in honor of its 90th anniversary, features 17 amusement rides, Sydney's Immersive Big Top, and the 1935-built Crystal Palace.

"The Luna Park business was a sought-after investment given its unique location on the shores of Sydney Harbour," adds Simon Rooney of CBRE, which brokered the sale. "The diverse opportunities to leverage the existing assets and customer base to drive revenue growth via additional amusement, immersive, and F&B initiatives were key drawcards for domestic and global buyers."

lunaparksydney.com | oscarsgroup.com.au

Timezone Expands New Zealand Footprint

Timezone has launched its 15th location in New Zealand. Located in The Base Shopping Centre in Te Rapa, Hamilton, the family entertainment center (FEC) spans 1,100 square meters and features spinning bumper cars, four bowling lanes, two party rooms, and more than 75 arcade games.

"Whether it's a child's birthday bash, a corporate gathering, or a milestone celebration, Timezone The Base stands out as the ideal venue for bringing people together," says Timezone New Zealand General Manager James Woodbridge. "Every aspect of the party experience is crafted with care."

The Entertainment and Education Group (TEEG), which is owned by the LAI Group and Quadrant Private Equity, operates more than 350 Timezone FECs across the Asia-Pacific region.

timezonegames.com

BIRGIT UTECH, IMAGELOUNGE

JEAN-FRANÇOIS BRIÈRE

Montreal Museum Spotlights Inuit Art Collection

The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (MMFA) has opened a new exhibit titled "ᐅᓗᒪᔪᑎᑦ uummaqutik: essence of life." The exhibit is dedicated to showcasing work created by Inuit artists. Developed by Inuk artist and curator asinnajaq, the inaugural exhibition includes 60 pieces from MMFA's collection.

"Featuring sculpture, drawing, painting, textiles, and a sound installation, this new display highlights the diversity and vitality of Inuit artistic creation while sharing remarkable works from the museum's collection," Mary-Dailey Desmarais, chief curator of the MMFA, explains. "Through this presentation, Inuk curator and artist asinnajaq invites us to embrace the powerful exchanges of energy that shape our world and to reflect on the interconnectedness of all things."

"ᐅᓗᒪᔪᑎᑦ uummaqutik: essence of life" will only continue to grow. Plans are in place to expand the exhibit over the next five years, providing visitors an opportunity to view about 120 works by 70 Inuit artists.

mbam.qc.ca

Great Wolf Lodge Opens First Resort in Florida

Great Wolf Resorts recently opened Great Wolf Lodge South Florida—its first resort in the Sunshine State. Located in Naples, Florida, the 500-room lodge features a 92,000-square-foot indoor water park heated to 84 degrees, as well as a 61,000-square-foot adventure park. There's also a variety of family-oriented programming, including an immersive evening storytelling experience before bedtime.

"We created an immersive environment that transports our guests into the stories and adventures of our characters," explains Jason Bays, general manager of Great Wolf Lodge South Florida. New attractions include a ropes course, miniature golf, and virtual reality experience. The $250 million investment by Blackstone and Centerbridge Partners created 675 full and part-time jobs. Great Wolf believes an estimated 500,000 annual visitors will visit the southwest Florida lodge, which is expected to generate $5 billion in local economic activity over 30 years.

greatwolf.com/naples

MARK ASHMAN

PARQUE DE LAS CIENCIAS

Puerto Rico's Parque de las Ciencias Receives Transformation

Parque de las Ciencias by Toro Verde is again open in Bayamón, marking a major milestone in the growth of the island's tourism and educational sectors. Following a seven-year hiatus and a $20 million transformation, the reimagined park now hosts 25 state-of-the-art attractions, making it one of the Caribbean's most innovative and tech-forward science parks.

Among the park's highlights is the Aerospace Institute, a museum created in partnership with NASA. This area features a gyroscope, exhibits showcasing aerospace history, and a virtual reality platform that allows visitors to experience flight simulations. Attractions in other themed sections include a projector dome, offering immersive video mappings of El Yunque Rainforest, and a multi-sensory indoor experience with special effects, animation, and music.

In addition to new attractions and food and beverage venues, enhancements to the park include sensory-friendly spaces, neurodiversity accommodations, and a trackless train system providing ease of access to more guests. Through workshops and interactive exhibits, the park aims to foster a love for STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) and inspire the next generation of scientists in Puerto Rico.

parquedelascienciaspr.com

Long-Awaited Grand Egyptian Museum Opens its Doors

Located in Giza, Egypt, the Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM) has opened its Main Galleries, offering a unique preview of 12 exhibition halls. This marks a significant step toward the museum's full opening, allowing visitors to explore Egypt's ancient history through a carefully curated collection.

Visitors can engage with the collection both chronologically and thematically, offering a personalized journey through Egypt's rich heritage. Beyond the Main Galleries, visitors can enjoy the Children's Museum, outdoor gardens, restaurants, and shops featuring Egyptian brands and crafts.

Iconic pieces like the Hanging Obelisk and the colossal statue of King Ramesses II are housed in the Grand Hall while the Grand Staircase displays more than 60 royal statues and artifacts, further immersing guests in Egypt's ancient legacy. The GEM is set to be a global beacon of Egypt's heritage, combining state-of-the-art technology with cultural preservation.

visit-gem.com

GRAND EGYPTIAN MUSEUM

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Movers and Shakers

by Michael Switow and Scott Fais

New VP of Development and Production at WOW! Entertainment

WOW! ENTERTAINMENT
Dewey Beene Jr.

Dewey Joe Beene Jr. is **WOW! Entertainment**'s new vice president of development and production. He brings more than 30 years of experience to the Texas-based production company, whose clients include Disney, Six Flags, and Warner Bros. "As we expand our focus, Dewey's leadership and deep understanding of large-scale event logistics will enhance our ability to offer an even higher level of service," says WOW! Entertainment founder Mark Brymer.

Hightower Joins Falcon's as Strategic Advisor

FALCON'S BEYOND
Mike Hightower

Mike Hightower joined **Falcon's Beyond** as its first strategic advisor. A former president of Universal Creative, Hightower has more than 30 years of experience and was a driving force behind projects like The Wizarding World of Harry Potter and Universal's Islands of Adventure. "I've always admired Mike's brilliance in stewardship and ability to make the impossible possible," says Falcon's Beyond CEO Cecil D. Magpuri. At Falcon's, Hightower will advise on potential acquisitions, provide strategic guidance for themed immersive attractions, and build relationships with clients and key stakeholders.

Kongeparken Brings on New CEO

KONGEPARKEN
Vibeke Fjordbakk

Vibeke Fjordbakk takes the helm at **Kongeparken,** "a magical holiday destination," located in Ålgård, Norway. The park is owned by **Lund Gruppen**, one of Scandinavia's largest companies in the attractions industry. Known as a launch pad for young workers, the park provides many teenagers with their first job. Fjordbakk, who has a background in hospitality and operations management, is committed to creating a supportive environment for seasonal employees. "I'm eager to contribute to the local community and firmly place Ålgård on the map as a key destination," she says.

New President and COO at Christie Digital Systems

CHRISTIE DIGITAL SYSTEMS
Michael Phipps

Michael Phipps is the new president and chief operating officer of **Christie Digital Systems**. Phipps joined Christie 16 years ago as an assistant controller. He worked his way up the ladder before becoming the company's chief financial officer in 2019. Phipps has "a deep understanding of the various aspects of our business," says Ushio Chief Executive Takabumi Asahi.

John McCann Joins Betson

BETSON
John McCann

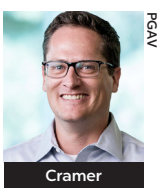
Betson Imperial Parts & Service, a leading parts distributor for the arcade and gaming sectors, created a new role for industry veteran **John McCann.** As senior sales engineering manager, the company says McCann will leverage his extensive technical expertise to support the sales team and deliver innovative solutions to customers. McCann will also continue to serve as head professor at Betson Technical University. "He will be a vital bridge between the sales and engineering departments, communicating customer feedback to drive product improvements for our new product lines," says Richard Zayas-Bazan, the company's president.

Carrie Boldman Retires at the Top

SIX FLAGS
Carrie Boldmann

Last summer, **Carrie Boldman** told attendees at IAAPA Presents: Cedar Point that she would conclude her career where it all began, effectively coming full circle. Boldman retired as **Cedar Point** vice president and general manager in late December. She began her attractions career as a ticket taker at the park before she could legally drive an automobile. Her attractions career led to leadership roles with the Walt Disney Company, creating premium experiences for Disney's Aulani, A Disney Resort & Spa, the Disney Cruise Line, and at Disney's theme parks in Hong Kong and Tokyo. Most recently, she served as the first female general manager in Cedar Point's 155-year history, leading the park through the global pandemic. Boldman's lasting mantra? "Make people happy!"

PGAV Secures its Future with Employee Ownership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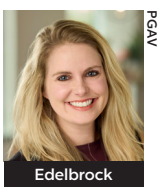
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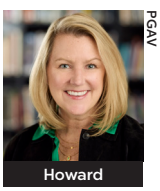
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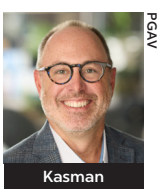
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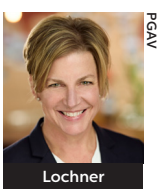
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Coinciding with **PGAV**'s 60th anniversary, the company recently announced a "strategic succession plan" with seven new owners set to shape the future of the respected planning and design firm based in St. Louis. Joining Mike Konzen and Mike Schaadt (who began leading PGAV in 2010) are **Steve Cramer**, **Chris Davis**, **Ashley Edelbrock**, **Emily Howard**, **John Kasman**, **Diane Lochner,** and **Tom Marschner**. The seven have a combined 151 years of service. The new owners will work closely with the current owners during a transition period. Konzen will continue as board chair, while Schaadt remains president and treasurer. Furthermore, Steve Troester, who retired in January, will continue to serve on the board until April 1. Andy Struckhoff remains a shareholder and president of PGAV Planners.

Vortex Expands U.S. Manufacturing with New Facility

Montreal-based **Vortex Aquatic Structures International** has announced a significant expansion of its manufacturing capabilities with the acquisition of a 50,000-square-foot facility in Plattsburgh, New York.

Beginning operations in Q1 2025, the new facility will increase production capacity, reduce lead times, and enhance Vortex's ability to deliver high-quality aquatic play and wellness products efficiently. The investment also reinforces Vortex's commitment to supporting local communities, including job creation and fostering partnerships with regional stakeholders.

"This expansion reflects our dedication to meeting the needs of our U.S. customers while supporting the Plattsburgh community," says Stephen Hamelin, Vortex president and CEO.

vortex-intl.com

VORTEX

HUSS RIDES

HUSS' New Spin

Break Dance 5, the newest evolution of **Huss Park Attractions'** iconic ride, places the operator at the center of the action. Equipped with a complete show control system in the middle of the platform, the ride operator can interact with guests and the ride. For live events with guest DJs, there is a second, external position for the ride operator. The new version of the ride—which moves 30% faster than the previous version—is designed on a slope to provide spectators with an unobstructed view. Break Dance 5 features redesigned gondolas with more spacious seating and individual lap bars, offering comfort and safety for up to 40 riders per cycle and a theoretical throughput of 1,200 people per hour.

hussrides.com

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by Arthur Levine

Geoff Thatcher Generates Buzz

AS SOON AS HE WAS OLD ENOUGH to ride his bicycle, Geoff Thatcher began frequently pedaling over to nearby Lagoon Amusement Park. At the time, the amusement park had an open gate and was a natural gathering place for kids in his hometown of Farmington, Utah.

"I literally grew up at Lagoon," Thatcher says.

It's also where he fell in love with parks and attractions, established his career path, and learned important life and work lessons. When he turned 14, he followed in his siblings' footsteps by working at Lagoon. Among the positions he held during his decade-long tenure were zookeeper and rides manager.

"Our job was to make people happy," says Thatcher. "That's what I loved about it. And the longer I've been in this career, the more I realize that it's fun and happiness and smiles that truly change people."

Thatcher studied journalism in college but discovered it wasn't his true calling during a brief detour as a newspaper editor in Cincinnati. After working on an article about the merger of Jack Rouse Associates and Wyatt Design Associates, he talked himself into a job as a creative writer at the experiential design shop (now known as JRA) by pitching his journalism skills and parks experience. Working on projects such as the CNN Studio Tour and Kellogg's Cereal City USA over the course of seven years brought Thatcher the joy and fulfillment he sought.

After working at other companies, he started his own shop, Creative Principals, in 2017. Working with parks, museums, and other clients, Thatcher and his team help develop and advance projects like the College Football Hall of Fame in Atlanta and the grand opening of Warner Bros. World Abu Dhabi.

IMAGES COURTESY OF GEOFF THATCHER

Geoff Thatcher returning to Lagoon in 2021 to speak to its frontline managers.

INSET: Geoff Thatcher as a young employee at Lagoon in 1991.

"We believe in the raw power of creativity and great ideas," he notes. "But creativity without leadership won't actually result in change."

Creative Principals' sweet spot is organizing and facilitating charettes in which participants build consensus and share a vision. The company's strengths, according to Thatcher, include crafting stories that lead to successful projects and persuading stakeholders to embrace creativity.

While brainstorming with clients, Thatcher often turns to Buzz Price, the researcher who helped shepherd the development of Disneyland and Walt Disney World, for inspiration. He regularly employs Price's "Yes, if" philosophy during discussions because it points to what needs to be done to achieve a goal. Thatcher is so enamored by the Disney legend, he helped create "Ask Buzz," a free app that allows users to crunch numbers for potential theme park and museum projects. In addition to data, it imparts Price's engaging maxims.

"One of my favorite 'Buzzisms' is, 'You do not build the church for Easter Sunday,'" he shares, laughing.

Driven by the gratification his work affords him, Thatcher enjoys evangelizing about parks and attractions.

"I love motivating young people to come into this industry because I think it's amazing," he says, adding that he found it rewarding to share his insights at a workshop with IAAPA Expo Show Ambassadors. Thatcher especially relished returning to Lagoon to speak with its frontline staff. "All I learned about creative leadership at Lagoon as a teenager prepared me for this wonderful, fun career."

A lifelong park fanatic, **Arthur Levine** first started writing newspaper and magazine travel features about the industry he loves in 1992. He produces his own Substack newsletter, "Arthur's About Theme Parks" at **AboutThemeParks.fun**

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Butterfly

Tower

Sundancer

by Michael Costello, Funworld managing editor

Creating a Compliant and Effective Standard Operating Procedures Manual

Expert advice for drafting and editing guidelines

KINGS ISLAND

IN AN EDUCATIONAL SESSION at the annual AIMS International Safety Seminar in Orlando in January 2025, Erik H. Beard, managing member of International Ride Training, LLC., stressed the vital role of standard operating procedures (SOP) in effective ride operations training. He explains the primary purpose of an SOP manual is to serve as a detailed training tool that enables employees to perform tasks accurately. "It is your bible of operation. People should be able to pick up your SOP manual and actually operate one of your rides with it," says Beard.

Beard also highlights the legal importance of SOP manuals. In litigation, they act as defense tools and demonstrate facility's commitment to safety and precision. Poorly written or incomplete manuals leave gaps that plaintiffs can exploit, potentially weakening the facility's case. Seasonal staff might completely understand all that is required, but can a person with no prior knowledge or experience read the SOP manual and know all tasks that need to be performed? A thorough, well-structured manual strengthens the defense. "If your manual is complete, it essentially tells the story of how safe you are and how much you're paying attention to the detail.," says Beard.

Finally, Beard addresses compliance. Most states mandate safety documentation, and failure to meet these requirements can result in audits, penalties, or even business closures. A well-detailed manual creates safe experiences for guests and employees, ensures compliance, reduces risks, and safeguards the facility's reputation.

Sourcing Material for a Manual

Creating a comprehensive SOP manual for an attraction requires gathering and organizing information from multiple sources to ensure it is practical, compliant, and tailored to meet the individual needs of a facility. Funworld presents the sources must be considered when gathering content for an SOP manual.

Manufacturer's Operations and Maintenance (O&M) Manual

The manufacturer's O&M manual is a critical starting point for creating an SOP manual. However, these manuals are often lengthy and filled with technical details that are irrelevant to ride operators. To effectively use the O&M manual, pull content that is operationally focused, such as height and weight requirements, button sequences for operation, restraint check procedures, and emergency stop protocols.

O&M manuals are often generic and will usually not account for a facility's specific installation. The SOP operations manual should focus on information that is required for operators to know, such as the location of platform dispatch buttons, queue layout and guest flow, and park-specific safety zones and procedures, distilled into clear, actionable steps.

Local Laws and Regulations

Compliance with local laws and regulations is essential when creating an SOP manual. Each jurisdiction has unique requirements, and failing to adhere to them can result in fines, liability, or even shutdowns. To gather this information, attractions need to identify their country, regional and local ride safety regulations. This may include restrictions such as rider weight requirements, signage, or evacuation plans. Regulations by region (state or province) within a country can vary significantly.

Compliance, documentation, and procedures should include training requirements for operators, inspection protocols, and emergency response procedures. Because regulations can change, operators should regularly review and update manuals to reflect the latest requirements.

An attraction that thoroughly understands and incorporates

local laws ensures an SOP manual meets legal standards and avoids compliance issues.

International Standards for Amusement Rides and Devices

ASTM International and EN standards are a cornerstone of ride safety and operations documentation globally. These standards provide a framework for creating SOP manuals that are both practical and compliant. Key steps include identifying relevant standards, determining what versions of those standards are applicable, and crafting a manual and checklist structure.

ASTM F770 is the standard for ride operations, maintenance, and inspection. It outlines required sections for SOP manuals, such as operator duties, evacuation plans, downtime and unusual condition protocols, park-specific instructions, and inspection protocols. EN 13814-2 focuses on operation, maintenance and use including SOP manual guidance.

ASTM and EN standards are written by industry professionals in a practical, easy-to-follow format that helps ensure an SOP manual aligns with industry best practices and regulatory expectations.

Considering a Facility's Unique Operating Experience

A facility's operating environment and experience is invaluable when creating an SOP manual. While standards and manufacturer guidelines provide a foundation, the specifics of the attraction's installation along with the attraction's team and their day-to-day knowledge adds practical insights. The same attraction installed at different facilities might have a different SOP manual because the operations of the ride or installation are not identical. When gathering tasks to be included in the manual, use proven practices for specific, outlined scenarios that have been vetted and tested.

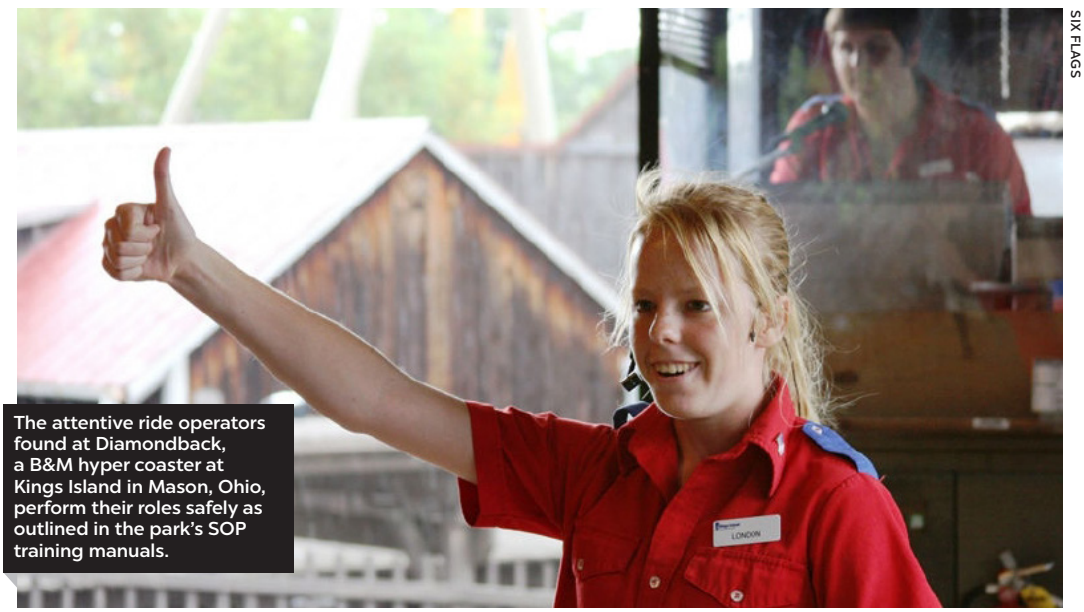
Proven practices incorporated from a facility's experience may include—but are not limited to—guest flow management strategies, the handling of common operational challenges, evacuation procedures, and facility or attraction protocols. These protocols may include the way a park or attraction handles guest complaints, weather-related ride closures, or procedures for responding to unique emergencies.

Facilities incorporating their operational knowledge helps create an SOP manual that is both practical and tailored to the facility and its attractions. Facilities must understand that manufacturer guidelines cannot be overridden and any operational changes should be discussed with the manufacturer, or if the manufacturer is not available, a functional safety review process is completed with a qualified individual.

The inclusion of visual aids such as photographs, diagrams, and charts ensure the SOP manual is more accessible, especially for employees with varying levels of reading comprehension.

A final and important step is for attractions to test their manuals to identify contradictions, ambiguities, or clarify concerns. Procedures must be tested step-by-step to ensure they are clear, accurate, and actionable.

Finally, an SOP manual should be organized with a clear table of contents that allows employees to quickly find needed information. FW



SIX FLAGS

The attentive ride operators found at Diamondback, a B&M hyper coaster at Kings Island in Mason, Ohio, perform their roles safely as outlined in the park's SOP training manuals.

Michael Costello is the managing editor of Funworld at IAAPA. With 20 years working in the attractions industry, he has also volunteered in his free time with the National Amusement Park Historical Association. Connect with him on LinkedIn:

by Roberto Baez, IAAPA Latin America, Caribbean marketing manager

Sweet Leadership and Values

Alexandre Costa

ATTRACTIONS LEADER ALEXANDRE COSTA has a full plate—and a sweet job. As president of Brazilian chocolate company Cacau Show and the upcoming Cacau Park, a chocolate-themed park opening in Itu, Brazil, he's busy guiding the team tasked with opening the new park in 2027. Costa shares his leadership approach, advice to other entrepreneurs, and what to expect from the upcoming attraction with Funworld.

What values do you promote in your team?

At Cacau Show, we have core values that guide our work and drive the company's success. Among these, I emphasize the passion for achieving, which motivates us to turn ideas into reality with excellence. We embrace the principle of "more for more," delivering greater value to customers, employees, and partners. Attention to detail is essential as every step of our work reflects care and precision.

We value innovation, striving for creative solutions that delight. Loyalty is a priority, fostering trust and transparency in relationships, along with kindness, respect, and pragmatism. They help us grow, innovate, and fulfill our mission to transform the ordinary into the extraordinary.

What leadership qualities do you possess that inspire your team?

I believe having a clear vision of where the company is headed is essential to motivating the team to work toward common goals and believe in the business's success. Another key quality is communication, which must be transparent and direct to engage the team and ensure alignment with objectives.

At Cacau Show, we practice transparent management. One example is a screen at our headquarters showing real-time revenue from all sales channels, and it's accessible to employees. This reinforces trust, a sense of belonging, and keeps the team motivated and aligned. Transparency fosters collaboration and trust, enabling challenges to be addressed collectively and strategically.

What advice would you give to young professionals entering the attractions industry?

The most important thing is to be passionate about what you do, because passion fuels the ability to navigate the ups and downs of daily life. Although I am new to the attractions industry, I've realized it demands dedication, innovation, and a clear purpose: providing happiness and unforgettable moments for people.

Immersing yourself in the industry, learning from best practices, and re-evaluating processes are fundamental.

Describe the Cacau Park project for Funworld readers.

Cacau Park is a dream coming to life.

Located in Itu, São Paulo, it is a project combining entertainment, history, and immersive experiences in Brazil. The park is inspired by cocoa and the history of chocolate—from Mayan civilizations to today—interwoven with Cacau Show's storytelling.

Every detail will offer an exciting and educational experience, exploring chocolate production and celebrating the history of a brand that transformed Brazil's chocolate market. The complex will feature themed hotels, an open-air boulevard with exclusive shops and restaurants, tasting spaces, event venues, and memory-making opportunities.

With a R$2 billion investment, the park is expected to attract three million visitors annually, creating more than 3,000 direct jobs and 9,000 indirect jobs, while generating more than R$35 billion for the national economy over a decade.

What do you hope visitors experience at Cacau Park?

I hope they have a unique and immersive sensory journey, deeply connecting with the world of chocolate and Cacau Show. I want the park to be a place where people have fun, dream, and feel like kids again, similar to the world's most iconic parks.

Roberto Baez is the marketing manager in IAAPA's Latin America, Caribbean region. With more than 25 years of experience working in the entertainment industry, he is passionate about communications, marketing, and roller coasters. Roberto's mantra of: "Life is about experiences" is perfect for the attractions industry. Connect with him on LinkedIn:

by Ylva Linder, global sustainability director, IAAPA

How Sustainability Yields Resilience and Growth

Future-proofing IAAPA and its members

ACCORDING TO IAAPA'S 2024 MEMBER-Non-Member Survey, 66% of member respondents indicated sustainability is important to their organization. This is one of the reasons why IAAPA has added a global sustainability director to the team, and I'm eager to make an impact in this new role.

Sustainability is no longer a choice—it's a necessity for business success and resilience, encompassing environmental, social, and economic dimensions. Mitigating risks related to these areas, and contributing for the sake of future generations, is crucial. However, beyond framing sustainability as a moral obligation, embracing sustainability also displays responsible leadership, attracts employees, sparks innovation, builds trust, and meets the rising expectations of investors, regulators, communities, and guests. It is important to me that I convey this message in my role, and I aim to support members in seeing sustainability as an opportunity rather than as a response to a threat.

Sustainability challenges differ, but three key factors provide valuable solutions for all companies. I've demonstrated the importance of these focus areas by carrying out practical initiatives throughout my career—most recently, as head of sustainability at Swedish amusement park Liseberg.

No. 1: Structure

Integrate sustainability into existing management systems, processes, and daily operations. It's also crucial to adapt it to an attraction and supplier type, size, and level of understanding. Combined with dedicated roles, clear working methods, and defined responsibilities, this structure will help ensure compliance and efficiency. Certification under either a global or local sustainability standard also strengthens internal focus and identifies opportunities for improvement while reducing risks.

No. 2: Culture

Engage employees at all levels and ensure leaders talk and act with a focus on sustainability. Offer training and programs to build commitment and align actions with goals. Sustainability requires teamwork to be effective. A sustainability ambassador program—like the one implemented at Liseberg—allows employees to advance sustainable practices through training, workshops, and idea-sharing. Similarly, accessibility training increases awareness and shows that inclusion can be supported with simple tools like respect and consideration, even without major structural changes.

No. 3: Creativity

Use sustainability as a catalyst for innovation and growth. Rethink products, services, and operations through a sustainability lens to find solutions that address challenges while creating business value. Nudging techniques, like simply renaming dishes and adjusting their placement on a menu—as demonstrated in one of Liseberg's park restaurants—boosted sales of low-carbon vegetarian options by more than 75%. This highlights how small changes can drive sustainable behavior and business growth.

IAAPA continues its journey to operate more sustainably, as the association aims to inspire change by working together with members and exchanging best practices. As IAAPA's global sustainability director, I welcome discussions on challenges and opportunities with members. Please do not hesitate to reach out with ideas and questions. I look forward to connecting!

Ylva Linder, Executive MBA, MSc Environmental Management, Chemical Engineer, brings 25 years of expertise in sustainability, including a decade dedicated to the attractions industry. As IAAPA's first-ever sustainability director, Ylva leads the organization's sustainability strategy, initiatives, and programs, driving positive change. Email Ylva at **YLinder@IAAPA.org** or connect with her on LinkedIn.

by Kelly Repass and Elaine Mathis

North American Attractions Industry Thrives

More than 1 billion visitors and 1.1 million jobs

CONSUMER SPENDING ON ATTRACTIONS continues to soar, underscoring the lasting value of shared experiences in today's economy. The 2024 North America Economic Impact Report reveals a record-breaking year for the attractions industry, with attendance exceeding 1 billion visitors and support for more than 1.1 million jobs.

This year's report marks a significant milestone as the most comprehensive analysis to date, now including data from seven attraction categories: amusement/theme parks, water parks, entertainment centers, zoos/aquariums, museums/science centers, historical/cultural attractions, and natural/adventure/eco/scenic destinations. Museums and science centers accounted for the largest share of attractions at 48%, followed by entertainment centers at 32%, while eco-attractions—a newly included category—captured 9% of the market. The inclusion of eco-attractions highlights the industry's growing diversity and expanding reach.

"As tourism spending rebounds and consumers prioritize experiences, the attractions industry has solidified its role as a vital driver of economic growth and job creation," says Jakob Wahl, CEO of IAAPA. "This year's report demonstrates how attractions, entertainment centers, and eco-parks are fostering connections and delivering lasting economic value."

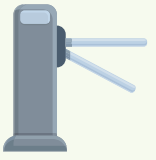
Michael Shelton, vice president and executive director of IAAPA North America, adds, "For the first time, we have a holistic view of the industry. These 2024 findings showcase the full economic impact of attractions across all seven categories, including their contribution to jobs and labor income."

The report, commissioned annually by IAAPA and conducted by Tourism Economics, an Oxford Economics company, provides a detailed snapshot of the industry's performance.

The attractions industry continues to be a cornerstone of North America's economic growth, reflecting the increasing demand for meaningful, shared experiences. FW

Key Findings from the 2024 North America Economic Impact Report

22K
Attractions
Nearly 22,000 attractions across the United States and Canada.



1B+
Visitors
Combined attendance surpassed 1 billion visitors.

1.1M
Jobs Generated
The industry supported 1.1 million jobs and generated $26.5 billion in tax contributions.

$57B
Labor Income
Total labor income reached $57 billion.

$188B
Total Revenue
Attractions across North America generated a total revenue impact of $188 billion, including $93.9 billion in direct revenue.

Access the full report at **IAAPA.org/NAEconomicImpactReport**

Kelly Repass serves as IAAPA's vice president of global research. Her interest areas include strategic assessment, primary and secondary research, data analytics, and actionable insights to drive business performance and growth. Connect with her on LinkedIn:

Elaine Mathis, Ph.D. is IAAPA's senior research analyst, where she helps IAAPA members leverage research to improve their businesses and explore consumer personalization through co-creation and the experience economy. Connect with her on LinkedIn:

by Danika Wong, revenue marketing, Satisfi Labs

Building Out Conversational Marketing Strategies

How attractions can harness AI-powered chat technologies

THROUGH AN IAAPA PARTNERSHIP with Satisfi Labs, CMO and Head of Marketing Engine Danika Wong relays the basics for attractions looking to build their conversational marketing strategy and invest in artificial intelligence-powered chat technologies.

What is conversational marketing, and how is it connected to and/or influenced by AI?

Communication channels are becoming increasingly more conversational. For example, chatbots, SMS (short message service—sending text messages between mobile devices), Facebook Messenger, and WhatsApp are all digital channels where people can engage in two-way conversations, whether it be with another human or AI. Similar to how social media was an emerging marketing discipline 15 to 20 years ago, conversational marketing is an emerging tactic that should be looked at holistically with its own defined strategies and technologies to support those strategies. AI, specifically conversational AI, is the most important technology because it is the only way to ensure consistency of the conversational experience at scale.

What are the first steps in thinking about conversational marketing?

Unlike traditional, one-sided marketing tactics, conversational marketing fosters two-way, dynamic communication to create seamless customer experiences. You can start by building chat experiences that solve your customers' problems, then focus on making the experience more enjoyable and intuitive through chat. You can map out conversational flows that match typical user journeys and profiles as well. Based on our platform's data, more than 50% of the questions our clients get relate to ticket purchasing and ticket support. This led us to initially focus on building out an experience that allows customers to receive hyper-detailed answers to their ticket purchase or post-purchase needs—or even guide them through ticket sales and payment without leaving the chat.

How are AI chat experiences changing how attractions approach customer segmentation and marketing campaigns?

AI chat experiences shift customer segmentation from static demographics to dynamic, intent-driven insights. Unlike purchase data, which shows what customers bought, or surveys that capture extremes of satisfaction, chat data reflects real-time interests. For instance, attractions can tailor campaigns for families or adventure seekers if guests ask about family-friendly areas or thrill rides. This enables more personalized, targeted marketing that adapts based on what customers seek, ensuring relevant content in real time.

What emerging trends are you seeing in how AI chat experiences bridge the gap between marketing communication and customer experience?

Digital two-way chat experiences are no longer just transactional—they're becoming comprehensive engagement points that simultaneously market, inform, and serve customers. They're transforming from simple communication tools to holistic engagement ecosystems that provide value at every interaction point. The next step for marketers will be connecting inbound and outbound communications and centralizing customer profile data to have even more personalized engagement. With these new conversational AI capabilities, we are finally ready to realize this vision. FW

Danika Wong is the CMO and head of marketing engine at Satisfi Labs, a conversational experience platform. Danika's career spans diverse industries, including ad tech at GroundTruth and e-commerce/retail marketing at Macys.com. Her work focuses on leveraging emerging technology to drive revenue and innovation. She holds a degree in political science and international studies from the University of California, Irvine.

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Association News and Benefits

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IAAPA FEC Committee chair Sherry Howell presents at IAAPA FEC Summit 2025 in New Orleans. Recap on *p. 32*

CHAD BAUMER

 Story by Scott Fais, photos by Chad Baumer

Frigid IAAPA FEC Summit 2025 Warms Minds

Record snowfall proves no match for insight provided in New Orleans

WHILE MORE THAN EIGHT INCHES OF SLEET AND SNOW FELL OUTSIDE—a rarity for New Orleans—attendees at IAAPA FEC Summit 2025 stayed warm inside, filling themselves with insight and key learnings. The largest event for family entertainment center (FEC) operators and vendors has gained a reputation as the place to network, source new products, and learn from experts.

"You really get a chance to connect with other operators that are on the same journey," says Crystal McGinnis, general manager of Dig It, a construction-themed learning and play center located in Torrance, California. "It helps me feel like I am able to walk back with things to do and ways to grow."

Growing business leads and making new connections is a highlight of the annual event, where curated content of interest to FEC owners is presented through keynote speakers and expert panelists.

"It's knowledge that you go away with—and you own it," says Sruly Rosenberg from VR 360 Action, a virtual reality manufacturer based in Brooklyn, New York, who appreciated the custom content designed for entrepreneurs.

The 2025 event presented best practices each morning in a convention setting and then provided site visits in the afternoon. On day two, attendees toured NOLA Motorsports Park, a growing facility with outdoor kart racing and natural mini golf, followed by a networking reception at Mardi Gras World, home to the largest collection of Mardi Gras floats.

"This event attracted me because of the resourceful people and events," says Harry Lu with Sindrax Technology Company who traveled from China to attend IAAPA FEC Summit 2025.

When mother nature's wrath scrubbed a visit to New Orlean's Game On Social Hub on Day three, IAAPA's North America team and the IAAPA FEC Committee successfully pivoted to provide additional educational programming in the conference center. FW

Mark your calendar! The greater Phoenix area will play host to IAAPA FEC Summit 2026. Be sure to attend the largest event tailored for FEC operators from Feb. 1-3.

Discover how Game On Social Hub is a leader in the FEC space by reading Funworld's feature online at **IAAPA.org/GameOn**.

"We need to adapt constantly to new guest expectations, challenges, and technology," says Massimiliano Freddi, 2025 IAAPA Chairman and owner of Wonderwood, a collection of outdoor natural attractions and indoor FECs in Italy. "I think FEC Summit is a gift we give to ourselves, where we spend a few days out of the office and share strategies."

IAAPA
FEC SUMMIT

 by Avery Matteo

Shaping a Greener Attractions Industry at IAAPA's APAC Sustainability Summit

IAAPA'S APAC SUSTAINABILITY SUMMIT, scheduled for March 13-14 in Singapore, promises to be a valuable event for attractions professionals seeking out the latest best practices in sustainability. This two-day, in-person gathering will unite industry leaders, sustainability advocates, and innovators to explore the latest strategies for advancing sustainability in attractions. From EDUSessions to exclusive EDUTours, the event is designed to empower attendees with actionable insights and lasting connections.

A Packed Agenda of Learning and Exploration

The Summit opens with a robust lineup of EDUSessions at Singapore Zoo's Forest Lodge, featuring industry experts who will share their experiences and strategies for sustainable development. Speakers include Addison Goh, senior director of business development at Gardens by the Bay; Meridith Beaujean, executive director of sustainability at Marina Bay Sands; Andreas Andersen, CEO and president of Liseberg; Anthony Tan, director of sustainability at Sentosa Development Corporation; Dr. Jessica Lee, deputy vice president and head of avian species programs and partnerships for Mandai Nature; Rohaya Saharom, vice president of sustainable solutions at Mandai Wildlife Group; and Tiara Jacquelina Eu Effendi, president of Enfiniti Group. Their sessions will delve into pressing topics like resource efficiency, guest engagement, and sustainable design.

Complementing the EDUSessions are exclusive EDUTours, which offer attendees a look at sustainability in action. Highlights include Rainforest Wild Asia, where innovative conservation practices take center stage, and Sentosa Sensoryscape, a model for green urban planning and immersive guest experiences. Attendees will also explore Universal Studios Singapore, a benchmark for balancing entertainment and eco-conscious operations.

Networking in Dynamic Settings

One of the Summit's key benefits is its curated networking events. Attendees will enjoy unique opportunities to connect with peers, share ideas, and build partnerships at receptions held in inspiring venues. On the first day, the Penguin Cove Restaurant at Bird Paradise sets the stage for meaningful discussions in a relaxed atmosphere. The Summit concludes with a closing reception at Adventure Cove Waterpark, a vibrant setting to reflect on insights and solidify connections.

Driving Innovation with State-of-the-Art Facilities

Singapore is regarded as a global hub for innovation and sustainability that will bring value to attendees. The Aloft Singapore Novena will serve as the accommodation hub, while modern venues, such as the Resorts World Convention Centre, provide a sophisticated setting for learning and dialogue.

Additionally, the inclusion of automated processes, efficient logistics, and climate-neutral facilities reflects IAAPA's commitment to sustainability not just as a theme, but as a practice woven into every aspect of the event.

A Call to Action for the Attractions Industry

The IAAPA APAC Sustainability Summit is designed for attractions leaders to be immersed in sustainable solutions. By prioritizing education, collaboration, and innovation, the Summit aims to empower leaders to adopt sustainable practices that resonate with evolving guest expectations and environmental goals. From learning from trailblazers to exploring cutting-edge practices, this IAAPA Connections event is an opportunity to gain a competitive edge while contributing to a greener future.

Programming is subject to change.

Learn more and register for IAAPA's APAC Sustainability Summit today at **IAAPA.org/Connection**

Register for IAAPA North America Summit 2025

IAAPA NORTH AMERICA SUMMIT 2025, set against the backdrop of the iconic Disney's Grand Californian Hotel & Spa in Anaheim, California, promises to be a dynamic event that facilitates connections. The three-day event—taking place from March 30 to April 1—will provide attendees with opportunities to network, learn, and explore best practices behind closed doors. "Hosting the Summit at a premier venue like the Disneyland Resort allows attendees to get a behind-the-scenes look at an iconic park and its surrounding offerings," says Vice President and Executive Director of IAAPA North America Michael Shelton. "They will also get a rare opportunity to hear from industry leader Chris Herschend, of Herschend Family Entertainment, on how his company is constantly looking to redefine the attractions space. With our trade partners back this year, attendees will also be inspired by new and innovative products from leading manufacturers and suppliers."

Beyond these exciting offerings, here's a day-to-day glimpse of what attendees can expect at IAAPA North America Summit 2025.

SUNDAY, MARCH 30
Welcome to Anaheim

The Summit kicks off with arrivals throughout the day at Disney's Grand Californian Hotel & Spa, where participants will check in and settle into their accommodations. From 4 to 5:30 p.m., registration will be open at Sequoia West Registration, allowing attendees to collect their materials and prepare for the days ahead. The evening will conclude with a lively Welcome Reception from 6:30 to 9 p.m., offering the first chance for participants to mingle and connect.

MONDAY, MARCH 31
Insights and Innovation Begin

The first full day of the Summit starts with Breakfast with Trade Connections, from 8 to 9 a.m. This networking breakfast sets the tone for meaningful conversations and collaboration.

Following breakfast, attendees will benefit from a compelling keynote session featuring Chris Herschend of Herschend Family Entertainment. He will share insights into "Destination Building," a key component of Herschend's growth strategy, highlighted by the recent historic expansion announcement for Silver Dollar City. Over the last decade, Herschend has successfully expanded its portfolio with Dollywood's DreamMore Resort and Heartsong Lodge, now applying that model to Silver Dollar City with the addition of a resort. His keynote will explore how company culture, guest experiences, and long-term vision drive sustainable growth.

Scott Steenrod's session on operational excellence will follow, focusing on Live! Hospitality's commitment to guest experience, talent and culture, and operational discipline. Designed as a "What Works" presentation, it will provide attendees with tangible takeaways to implement within their own businesses.

At 2 p.m., attendees will depart for an EDUTour at Knott's Berry Farm, sponsored by Smart Industries. Attendees will gain an insider look at the park's renowned Boysenberry Festival, which boasts over 75 boysenberry-inspired menu items, including craft beer and wine. An exclusive mini Boysenberry Festival inside the Boardwalk Ballroom will feature tastings of unique culinary creations, and a special Q&A panel—including a guest appearance by Snoopy—will dive into the festival's rich history and meticulous planning process. This behind-the-scenes experience showcases the entertainment, activities, crafts, merchandise, and shows that make this festival a cherished tradition.

TUESDAY, APRIL 1
Final Day of Inspiration

The day begins with an exclusive pre-opening walking EDUTour of Disneyland's Toontown, which includes an opportunity to ride Mickey and Minnie's Runaway Railway. Following the tour, attendees will have breakfast, after which attendees will be treated to a presentation from a Disneyland Park representative on the development and transformation of the Toontown land. From 11 to 12 p.m., Disney Imagineers will share a presentation on the insights and innovation behind Tiana's Bayou Adventure. Lunch will be held from 12 to 1 p.m., and from 1 to 2 p.m., attendees can expect to enjoy a post-lunch speaker and a tour of Downtown Disney. For the rest of the afternoon, attendees are encouraged to stretch their legs by exploring Disneyland independently—before reconvening at 6 p.m. for a special Food & Wine-inspired dinner and a VIP viewing of the World of Color - One evening show.

Programming subject to change. Learn more and register for IAAPA North America Summit 2025 at **IAAPA.org/Connections**

Apply Now for IAAPA Global Board of Directors

LEADERS WITH EXPERTISE who are ready to engage with prominent thought leaders in the global attractions industry to shape the future of IAAPA are encouraged to apply for the 2026 IAAPA Global Board of Directors. The organization's forward momentum and strategic growth is guided in part by the 22-person board, composed of operators, owners, consultants, and manufacturers from around the world.

In return, board member Pia Adlivankin of Finland says participating on the IAAPA Global Board of Directors provides insight that cannot be found elsewhere.

"Being on the IAAPA Board of Directors is an excellent way to gain a better understanding of the industry. Within a strong, versatile network, you share knowledge that can help everyone develop their own operations, while together building the industry for future generations," Adlivankin tells Funworld.

Other board members share that participation has changed their perspective.

"I have learned the importance of patience and broad-mindedness," says Corrine Brindley, who recently retired from United Parks & Resorts after decades of service in government relations. "Donating your time to the IAAPA board—or any committee or task force, for that matter—brings together the wisdom of legendary careers, the practicality of the career middles, and the energy and freshness of the career rookies, who together solve our industry issues. It will take the contributions of all of us to maintain a thriving community."

The IAAPA Governance Committee will accept applications for the 2026 IAAPA Global Board of Directors through June 12. FW

Learn more about the IAAPA Global Board of Directors and apply at **IAAPA.org/BoardofDirectors**

Industry Headlines Delivered Daily

Sign up for IAAPA News Daily email

WITH ONE CLICK, THE LATEST NEWS from across the global attractions industry can arrive in your inbox.

IAAPA News Daily presents curated headlines from professional media outlets around the world. Busy attractions professionals can stay connected with the latest news from theme parks, water parks, zoos, aquariums, family entertainment centers, science centers, museums, adventure parks, natural attractions, and resorts—all in one email.

Produced by the same journalists who bring you Funworld, IAAPA News Daily is the go-to source for news, features, job postings, press releases, the latest IAAPA Connections events, and IAAPA Awards information. Open our daily email to stay connected with the people, places, and attractions embracing trends, taking risks, and moving business forward.

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IAAPA NEWS
Daily
Attractions Industry News Exclusively for IAAPA Members
Breaking News: Six Flags in New Jersey announces closure of 3 rides

Celebrate Industry Excellence at IAAPA Honors

SET AGAINST THE STUNNING BACKDROP of Europa-Park in Rust, Germany, from April 28-30, IAAPA Honors will bring together the brightest minds and most influential leaders in the attractions industry. This dynamic event celebrates the pioneers, innovators, and dreamers who are shaping the future of the industry. At the heart of the celebration, the prestigious IAAPA Brass Ring Awards will honor exceptional achievements across various categories, including marketing, sustainability, live entertainment, and more.

IAAPA Honors offers a rare opportunity to dive into forward-thinking projects, unlocking insights that can transform any business. Attendees will have exclusive access to award-winning initiatives and leave with actionable strategies and fresh ideas to implement immediately. A key highlight of the event is the behind-the-scenes look at Europa-Park's world-class operations, alongside an in-depth exploration of the groundbreaking Voltron Nevera campaign—a two-year marketing initiative powered by Rimac that's revolutionizing guest engagement.

Hasbro City in Mexico wins the IAAPA Brass Ring Award for the Best Family Entertainment Center in the World at IAAPA Honors 2024.

This event is more than just an awards ceremony; it's a chance to engage with industry leaders, influencers, and innovators. IAAPA Honors provides a dynamic space for collaboration and idea exchange, where new ideas take shape and the future of the industry is defined.

Exclusive EDUTours offer rare access to the inner workings of Europa-Park, providing valuable insights into the strategies that have set the park apart as a leader in the industry.

Don't miss the opportunity to attend IAAPA Honors from April 28-30 and experience firsthand how innovation and inspiration are reshaping the attractions industry. FW

IAAPA HONORS

Learn more and register for IAAPA Honors 2025 at **IAAPA.org/Connections**

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Host an Event at the IAAPA Headquarters

Rental fees directly support the work of the IAAPA Foundation

IAAPA INVITES MEMBERS of the global attractions industry to host meetings and events at IAAPA Headquarters in Orlando. Nestled on a scenic seven-acre property with a picturesque lake, IAAPA's workspaces are designed to serve as a hub for industry connections and innovation.

Versatile Meeting Spaces

IAAPA Headquarters offers a variety of rentable spaces to suit gatherings of all sizes. With options ranging from intimate 150-square-foot rooms to expansive 2,010-square-foot areas, both indoor and outdoor settings are available to accommodate diverse event needs. The facility includes:

- **Connections A:** 720 square feet, ideal for 20-40 attendees.
- **Connections B:** 750 square feet, suitable for 20-40 attendees.
- **Connections A and B Combined:** 1,470 square feet, able to host up to 80 attendees.
- **Outdoor Terrace**: 1,100 square feet, accommodating up to 120 attendees with a spacious lawn, perfect for social games.
- **Lobby:** 2,010 square feet, capable of welcoming 130 attendees.
- **Member Outpost:** 150 square feet, designed for small groups of up to five attendees.

IAAPA members enjoy exclusive discounts when booking meeting spaces.

Convenient Accessibility and Comprehensive Support

IAAPA Headquarters ensures easy access to transportation hubs. A Lynx bus stop is within walking distance of the entrance, and the Orlando International Airport and Brightline station is a short drive away. Events can be scheduled from Monday through Saturday, between 8 a.m. and 8 p.m., providing ample flexibility. Additional event support is readily available for an additional fee, including audio-visual equipment installation and catering services from IAAPA's preferred vendor list. On-site overnight parking is also available.

Sustainable and Innovative Design

IAAPA Headquarters exemplifies sustainability in its design and construction, and it's tailored to perform efficiently in the Florida climate. The property features a 10.5 kW solar farm and four electric vehicle charging stations, underlining the association's commitment to environmentally responsible practices. FW

To book your next Orlando event, visit **IAAPA.org/IAAPAHQMeetings** or contact the IAAPA Meetings & Special Events department via email at **Meetings@IAAPA.org**

IAAPA Foundation Announces Generous Donations

SUMMIT One Vanderbilt supports future leaders

THE IAAPA FOUNDATION is proud to announce SUMMIT One Vanderbilt in New York has made two generous donations to the foundation. A contribution of $10,000 in 2024 enabled three students to attend the prestigious IAAPA Institute for Attractions Professionals (IIAP) at IAAPA Expo in Orlando, covering their enrollment and travel expenses. Thanks to a matching program provided by IAAPA, the donation's impact was doubled to $20,000.

The supported students benefited from an immersive educational experience, networking opportunities with industry leaders, and actionable insights to launch their careers in the attractions field.

"We are thrilled to see how SUMMIT One Vanderbilt's investment has directly impacted these students and inspired the next generation of attractions professionals," says IAAPA Foundation Board Chair Jim Seay.

Building on the success of this initiative, SUMMIT One Vanderbilt recently announced during the IAAPA Foundation Board meeting that they will contribute an additional $10,000 to fund a similar program in 2025. With IAAPA's continued matching, this new donation will bring the total impact of SUMMIT One Vanderbilt's generosity to $40,000 over two years.

"This partnership underscores SUMMIT One Vanderbilt's commitment to advancing education and professional development within the attractions industry," says James Potter, Vice President of Guest Experiences at SUMMIT One Vanderbilt. We are proud to support the IAAPA Foundation in creating opportunities for students to thrive and innovate in this exciting field."

Funworld will share the inspiring stories from the scholarship recipients in a future edition of the magazine, highlighting SUMMIT One Vanderbilt's contributions and their unwavering commitment to driving innovation and growth within the attractions industry

"This program gives you a direct look into the industry. The speakers, who are seasoned professionals, share every detail you need to know. They openly talk about their successes and failures and are more than happy to pass on their wisdom to young professionals!"

—Mariam Gogoladze

"Being a part of the Institute for Attractions Professionals (IAP) allowed me to learn about industry-leading technology and best practices used worldwide. I was able to meet with other students and industry professionals, allowing me to grow my network and learn about different fields within the business."

—Christopher Lim

"My experience was very eye opening and exciting! Getting to know so many people in the field was a huge insight. Especially within the luncheon, where I got to hear from different global perspectives. The eventful agenda with the program has helped me gain valuable knowledge and hands on experience with business development initiatives."

—Ilithia Zhunepluas

About IAAPA Foundation

The IAAPA Foundation is dedicated to inspiring life-changing careers and professional development within the global attractions industry. Through scholarships, training programs, and leadership initiatives, the foundation empowers individuals to contribute meaningfully to the field. The foundation is a U.S. 501(C)(3) non-profit charity.

About SUMMIT One Vanderbilt

SUMMIT One Vanderbilt is New York City's premier attraction, offering unparalleled experiences and breathtaking views of the city. Committed to innovation and community impact, SUMMIT One Vanderbilt supports educational initiatives that foster growth and creativity in the attractions industry.

For more information about the IAAPA Foundation and its mission to support the future of the attractions industry, please visit **IAAPA.org/Foundation**

Eryka Washington Perry is the director of global communications at IAAPA. Previously, she worked in areas of communications ranging from television news anchor and investigative reporter, to director of communications in government organizations. Connect with her on LinkedIn:

The Power of IAAPA Membership

As the global leader in the attractions industry, IAAPA offers unbeatable membership benefits tailored to professionals, companies, and organizations.

2025 Membership Options

IAAPA caters to the varied needs of industry stakeholders and offers three membership categories:

- **Attractions Facilities:** Designed for amusement parks, water parks, entertainment centers, museums, zoos, natural attractions, resorts, and more, this membership provides comprehensive coverage for entire facilities, irrespective of size.
- **Manufacturer/Supplier/Consultant:** Tailored for companies engaged in manufacturing, supplying, or consulting within the attractions sector, this membership extends across the entire organizational spectrum.
- **Individual/Student:** Crafted for professionals operating within the attractions industry, this membership offers tailored categories catering to diverse career stages, including young professionals, retirees, educators, and students.

Member Benefits

IAAPA membership affords unparalleled advantages aimed at driving strategic growth and fostering professional development.

News and Publications

- **Funworld Magazine:** Gain access to the industry's preeminent source of information, covering trends, innovations, and best practices, delivered in print and digital formats.
- **IAAPA News Daily:** Produced by Funworld's editorial team, this daily e-newsletter delivers headlines and insights from accredited news sources across the globe.
- IAAPA.org Access: Seamlessly navigate industry news, event information, educational resources, and regional updates via IAAPA.org, the association's centralized online platform.

Connections

- **Expos and Events:** Experience premier networking, innovation, and knowledge-sharing opportunities at IAAPA's flagship events, where members enjoy exclusive perks and savings on registration fees, exhibit spaces, and event tickets.
- **IAAPA Regional Events:** Network with industry peers and stakeholders at discounted rates through a comprehensive calendar of regional networking events.
- **IAAPA Connect+:** Enhance your event experience with an interactive platform providing easy access to schedules, exhibitor information, wayfinding tools, and the chance to connect with fellow attendees.
- **IAAPA Connect+ Marketplace:** Access a virtual hub for year-round networking and business opportunities, connecting buyers and sellers across the globe.
- **IAAPA Job Board:** Source top talent and explore career opportunities within the global attractions industry through IAAPA's dedicated job board.

Research and Resources

- **Reports and Industry Data:** Tap into the premier source of global attractions research. Explore operational benchmark reports, regional economic impact studies, quarterly outlook reports, and an annual global theme and amusement park outlook study.
- **Crisis Communications Support:** Ensure your organization is ready for a crisis. Download IAAPA's Crisis Communications Template from the IAAPA Bookstore. In a crisis, call the 24/7 support line: +1 321-319-7602.
- **Business Solutions Partnership Program:** Provides the resources and support to create new and proven revenue streams, reduce costs, and optimize operational efficiencies.
- **Hosted Buyer Program:** Meet with a wide range of IAAPA Expo exhibitors to learn about new products and trends, network with leaders, and stay up to date with the latest industry developments.

Education

- **Certification Programs:** Elevate professional credentials with esteemed certification programs, including the IAAPA Certified Attractions Professional (ICAP) and IAAPA Certified Attractions Executive (ICAE) designations.
- **Webinars, Webcasts, and Online Learning:** Engage in monthly live webinars, archived sessions, and online learning resources covering industry-specific topics, which are available in multiple languages.

Safety Standards and Training

- **Facility Excellence Self-Assessment:** Leverage IAAPA's safety tool to measure progress and assess the health of safety procedures.
- **Safety Guidance:** Prioritize safety and compliance with IAAPA's global efforts to establish industry-leading safety standards and comprehensive training initiatives.

Public Affairs

- **Industry Advocacy:** Benefit from IAAPA's advocacy efforts aimed at shaping industry regulations and legislation to ensure a conducive business environment for attractions professionals worldwide.

IAAPA membership serves as a catalyst for professional growth and industry advancement, offering a wealth of benefits tailored to meet the diverse needs of attractions professionals worldwide. Join IAAPA today and unlock the full spectrum of advantages poised to elevate success within the global attractions industry. Visit **IAAPA.org** to learn more.

Visit **www.IAAPA.org** to explore the full breadth of the association's offerings.

This is a partial listing of upcoming IAAPA events. Event details are as of 1/31/25, and subject to change. For the most up-to-date information, visit **IAAPA.org/Events**

MARCH 2025

IAAPA EXPLORES

F&B Trends Philadelphia
3-5 | Philadelphia

IAAPA APAC Sustainability Summit
13-14 | Singapore

IAAPA Meetup: China Attractions Expo
19 | Beijing

Latin America, Caribbean Summit 2025
24-26 | Mexico City

IAAPA North America Summit 2025
30-April 1 | Anaheim, California

APRIL 2025

IAAPA | HONORS

28-30 | Rust, Germany

JUNE 2025

IAAPA EXPO ASIA

30-July 3 | Shanghai

SEPTEMBER 2025

IAAPA EXPO EUROPE

22-26 | Barcelona, Spain

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Mailed In-County Paid Subscriptions	0	0
Paid Distribution Outside the Mail	5,510	5,544
Paid Distribution by Other Classes	0	0
Total Paid Distribution	**15,412**	**17,932**
Free or Nominal Rate Outside-County Copies	0	0
Free or Nominal Rate In-County Copies	0	0
Free or Nominal Rate Copies Mailed at Other Classes	0	0
Free or Nominal Rate Distribution Outside the Mail	581	217
Total Free or Nominal Rate Distribution	581	217
Total Distribution	15,993	18,149
Copies not Distributed	50	20
Total	**16,043**	**18,169**
Percent Paid	95.5%	94%

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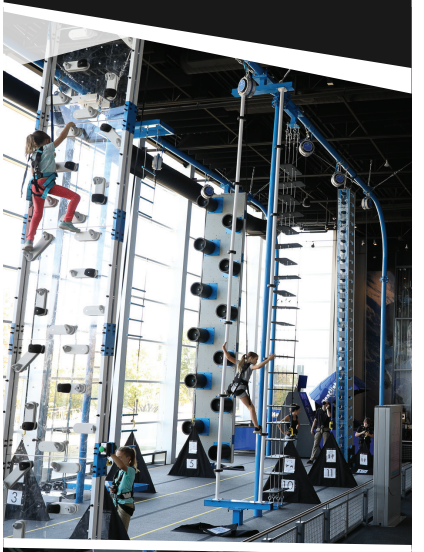

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Women who Wow

Engineering the Future

Vekoma Rides CEO Anne-Mart Agerbeek reflects on one year of leadership

by Avery Matteo

ON THE BUSTLING TRADE SHOW FLOOR OF IAAPA EXPO in Orlando, Anne-Mart Agerbeek seems to perfectly embody the spirit of her company: approachable, dynamic, and in high demand. As early as 9 a.m., friends and peers passing the Vekoma Rides booth gravitated toward her, eager to catch up, exchange a laugh, or share a quick introduction. As CEO of Vekoma, regarded as one of the world's premier roller coaster manufacturers, Agerbeek has a clear vision of the direction in which she wants to steer the company—and is poised to leverage her broad expertise and people-focused philosophies to make it happen.

Fueling a Renaissance

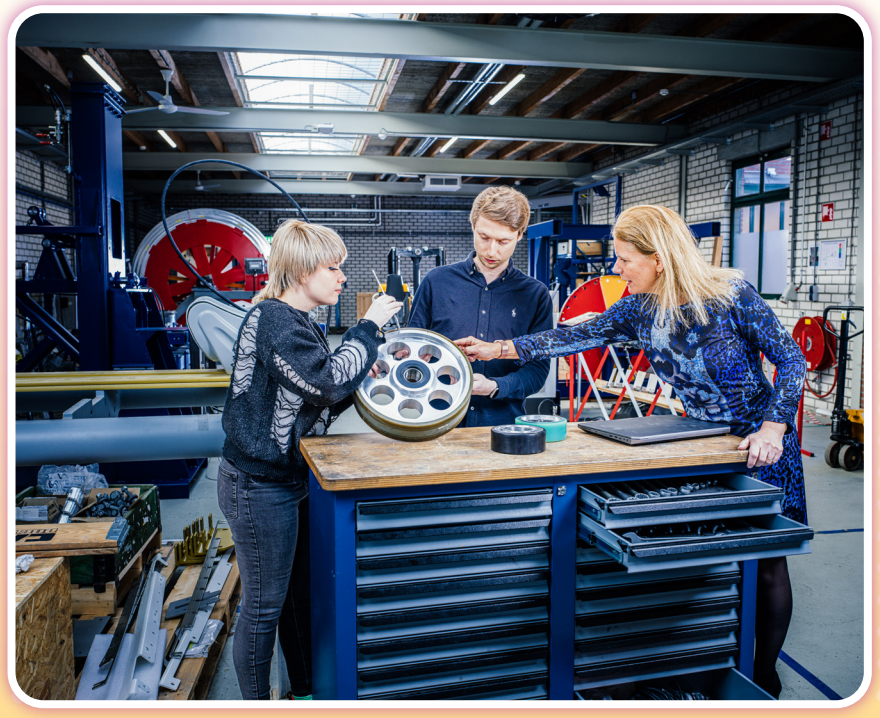
Agerbeek reached the one-year mark serving as CEO of Netherlands-based Vekoma Rides in January. She transitioned into the role at the storied ride manufacturing company after more than five years as chief financial officer, bringing with her a wealth of expertise and an intimate understanding of the organization's values and operations. During her tenure as CEO, Agerbeek aims to build upon what she describes as Vekoma's ongoing "Renaissance"—a deliberate evolution that began more than a decade ago, transforming the manufacturer into a company with a reputation of providing innovative engineering and superior guest experiences.

"Around 2008, we invested in our design and production methods to further improve the quality of our rides," says Agerbeek. "Now, we are at the point where you see the progress of the last 10 to 15 years. Our priority is to maintain this level of quality and meet the highest safety and performance standards."

Agerbeek also values fostering a positive work culture for her team in Vlodrop, Netherlands, and at offices around the world. She believes this is essential for attracting and retaining the talent that will power Vekoma's continued growth. "It's about how to make people willing to work for Vekoma, willing to take the extra mile, willing to be innovative and come up with the right solution that meets our customers' needs and expectations, which keeps us on the path we are on now—while also attracting new people that will help build the future generations," Agerbeek says. "Our challenge is that we want to do everything … then we have 100 improvement programs and projects," she jokes.

Entering the Attractions Industry

Reflecting on her unconventional career path, Agerbeek credits a combination of curiosity and serendipity for leading her to the attractions industry. "I studied computer science because I love mathematics," she says. Her early roles included working as a stockbroker and a director within the construction industry before taking on the CFO role at gear production company Bierens (now PWT Group). However, it wasn't until a headhunter approached her about a position at Vekoma that Agerbeek considered the prospect of a role fabricating attractions. "I didn't even know the attractions industry existed in this way," she admits. "But the moment I stepped into the company, I knew—this is something special." Agerbeek was immediately drawn to Vekoma's family-like culture and its mission to create lasting memories for guests. "It's about so much more than the rides themselves," she explains. "It's about the moments when families visit parks together, the joy and connection those experiences bring. That's what this industry is all about." Now, at the helm as CEO for the past 15 months, Agerbeek channels that sense of purpose into her work, striving to align innovation, teamwork, and guest-focused design as the cornerstones of Vekoma's future.



KRIS VAN DE SANDE

Agerbeek and two of her team members oversee a project at Vekoma's factory in the Netherlands.

Cementing Core Values

Agerbeek considers Vekoma's commitment to quality to be the company's priority. "One of our core values is that quality always wins. It's so embedded in our DNA here," she says. However, she acknowledges that balancing perfection with practicality can be a challenge. "Sometimes, we want to push it too far. At some point, we have to decide, OK, this is good enough?' But having that standard of excellence drives everything we do."

When asked about her priorities and changes she intends to make, Agerbeek clarifies that she remains in lockstep with the individuals she works most closely with when it's time to make important decisions. "The difference in my new role isn't as big as people think. When I joined six years ago, Har Kupers was the CEO, and there were four of us on the board—two men and two women—and we always worked as a team. So, for me, the subjects are not new; the responsibility is new."

There are also challenges that come with maintaining a collaborative

atmosphere within a growing company. "How do we make sure that people really listen to each other and cooperate together?" Agerbeek asks herself. "Communication and keeping each other informed about what is going on is essential. My role as CEO is to connect people from different departments within the company. This way, we can create a synergy among the different teams and their needs to align with the mission and goals of our company." She puts this into action by encouraging employees to talk to one another, take time to understand the needs of other departments, and find ways to unify in times of conflict.

Technical Developments

Vekoma's modern approach to roller coaster design and production reflects its dedication to innovation. Agerbeek details the company's technical evolution, stating, "We started with a concept design process where we use tailor-made software. Instead of creating a layout and then analyzing the G-forces, we now design based on the desired forces and speeds, letting the layout emerge from those calculations."

In addition to revolutionary design processes, Vekoma has invested heavily in technology, such as 3D bending machinery and robotic track-building systems. "It's like having a Ferrari—you need a smooth road to enjoy it. Our new tools ensure that the ride experience is as smooth as possible," Agerbeek explains.

Extensive testing is a crucial part of the quality assurance process.

"For instance, we built a 20-meter-high tower of the Tilt Coaster at the test facility on our premises to test the newly engineered tilt mechanism and ride comfort during a period of nine months," says Agerbeek.

Vekoma's after-sales strategy has also been a cornerstone of its revival. "We don't just hand over the ride and say, 'Good luck!' We're committed to the next 30, 40, 50, or even 100 years of its lifecycle," she says. With three warehouses, including one in the U.S., and a robust stock of spare parts, the company prioritizes minimizing downtime for its clients. "We have 95% of all wearable spare parts in our warehouses. That's a huge investment for us, but I think it's really worthwhile," shares Agerbeek.

VEKOMA

Agerbeek and preceding Vekoma CEO Har Kupers break ground on a project.

Sustainable Solutions

Vekoma's new climate-neutral factory under construction in Vlodrop exemplifies the manufacturer's commitment to sustainability and innovation. "We're automating processes even more, which helps address labor shortages and improves efficiency," Agerbeek shares. Beyond operational advancements, the new facility advances Vekoma's focus on employee well-being. The current building, embedded along Vlodrop's narrow streets and sandwiched among brick-built homes neighboring the facility, dates back to 1936. "The new space will provide a much better working atmosphere, and that's important because it's all about our people. If we create an environment they're proud of, it fosters innovation and attracts top talent."

Cementing Confidence

Reflecting on her career, Agerbeek credits an early mentor for pushing her beyond her comfort zone. "I remember working with Swiss clients who only spoke German. My manager threw me a dictionary and said, 'Figure it out.' It was tough, but it taught me resilience," she recalls.

Agerbeek also acknowledged the unique challenges women face when pursuing leadership roles. "When I was offered the CEO position, I doubted myself. My husband reminded me that

KRIS VAN DE SANDE

I'd said the same thing about every job I've had—and I always succeeded. I think what they [presenters at the IAAPA Expo Women in the Industry Networking Lunch at IAAPA Expo 2024] said is true: It's often noted that when there's a job interview or an opening with specific qualifications, women tend to feel they need to meet nearly 100% of the qualifications before they apply. In contrast, men might feel confident applying even if they meet around 60% of the criteria."

MICHAEL PEREZ-PASCUAL

ABOVE: Gathered around the chassis of a new roller coaster, Agerbeek shares a smile with a colleague inside Vekoma's factory in the Netherlands.

RIGHT: At IAAPA Expo 2024, Agerbeek sits in front of a ride vehicle designed for Tecuani Beast, a multi-launch Vekoma coaster coming to Vidanta World BON (an acronym for beauty and nature) in Mexico.

Inspiring the Next Generation

Agerbeek is an advocate for gender diversity in engineering and manufacturing. Beyond her corporate responsibilities, Agerbeek dedicates time to inspiring young women to consider careers in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). "In the Netherlands, we have a shortage of girls studying engineering. I participate in evening events and host groups of students at Vekoma," she says. These initiatives include showcasing female welders and engineers to students, demonstrating the breadth of opportunities available in the attractions industry.

"I tell them, 'Don't be afraid to try something new. This industry is so broad—there's a place for everyone,'" Agerbeek shares. By breaking down stereotypes and encouraging young girls to pursue technical careers, she hopes to diversify the talent pipeline.

A Vision for the Future

Under Agerbeek's leadership, Vekoma continues to prioritize innovation, sustainability, and collaboration. Whether through advanced design tools, climate-conscious factories, or efforts to engage the next generation, her vision reflects a deep commitment to excellence. "It's not about me," she says. "It's about our people and the incredible work they do every day. Together, we're building experiences that will bring joy." FW

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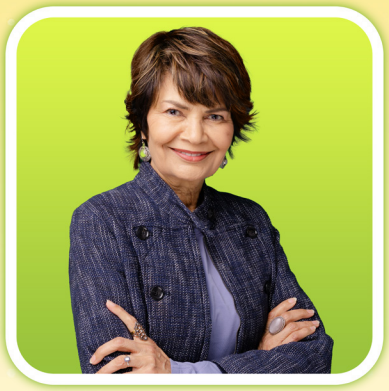
The women shaping the future of attractions

by Avery Matteo and Juliana Gilling

IN EVERY CORNER OF THE GLOBAL ATTRACTIONS INDUSTRY, women are bringing bold ideas, diverse perspectives, and unwavering determination to their roles. From safety and data analytics to creative storytelling and generational leadership, the following profiles highlight the remarkable ways women are driving innovation and inspiring change in a dynamic industry. Funworld is delighted to celebrate women across all disciplines and experiences, illuminating their unique journeys and the impact they've made. Their anecdotes demonstrate the vibrancy and versatility of the attractions industry—and, just as importantly, the power of mentorship, persistence, and a shared vision for an inclusive future.



Rani Bal

Rani Bal, vice president of people at THG Creative, traces her journey in the attractions industry back to a summer job managing a restaurant at Kings Dominion theme park in Doswell, Virginia. "I never looked back," she says, recalling how that first role ignited her passion for the field. Over her career, Bal has become renowned for her unique approach to hiring, which she calls matchmaking. She explains, "I don't hire the resume; I hire the person. Oftentimes, I'm hiring potential—it may not be the exact fit in the moment, but that's what I take pride in." Her ability to recognize talent has helped launch the careers of many successful professionals in the industry.

Bal attributes her growth to a network of mentors and collaborators, both male and female, who have shaped her path. "I've been really lucky," she shares. "I never referred to them as mentors; I always said people adopted me." She likens the lessons she's gained to "heirlooms" that she carries forward, crediting colleagues like Mary Cluff for inspiring pivotal career shifts. To those entering the industry, Bal advises: "Networking is so, so important. Learn how to say yes. The more yeses you say, the more opportunities you get, and the more layered your resume becomes."

Heather Barnes

Heather Barnes, founder and CEO of Improv at Work LLC and a faculty member at Northwestern, first started shaping the attractions industry in 2006, with a focus on museums and zoos. Her journey began when an innovative boss encouraged her to explore diverse industries to enhance the guest experience at the Museum of Science and Industry. "I was floored by how much sharing there was," she recalled of her first IAAPA experience. "It was awesome." Over the years, Barnes has built a reputation for resilience and growth. "I'm proud of my moments when I've failed," she admits. "I try to push myself to learn from those failures, to evolve, and to move forward on something more positive."

Barnes is particularly proud of the community she's helped foster, including her work on the IAAPA Education Committee. Her advice to aspiring industry leaders is clear: "Participate. Ask how to get involved. Look for mentors and ask them to be mentors," she emphasizes. "Sometimes it takes you taking initiative again and again to figure out the next step. No one's going to take care of your career—you have to take charge and take initiative."

MJ Brewer

MJ Brewer, senior risk consultant for American Specialty Insurance and a dedicated member of the IAAPA North America Regional Advisory Board, began her journey in the attractions industry with early roles in public parks and aquatic recreation. She eventually made the transition to private water parks through a water park manager role at Six Flags Fiesta Texas, where her career blossomed. She then turned her focus to safety and risk management, becoming a senior leader in the sector. As a woman navigating traditionally male-dominated roles, such as a park maintenance director and a third-party amusement ride inspector, she says that "you have to be willing to expand your knowledge, to get education that gives you ways to hold your own in that male-dominated environment. I think that all people respect knowledge, and they respect expertise, so if you take the time to improve that, I think that's how you get ahead." Brewer has also strengthened her knowledge and network through her involvement with IAAPA. "I've been involved with IAAPA for probably about 20 years," she reflects. In her interactions with individuals looking to follow a similar career trajectory, Brewer aims to inspire others to break barriers and find their path to leadership in the attractions industry.

Gina Claassen

Gina Claassen, vice president of safety at Herschend Family Entertainment, began her journey in attractions with a summer job at Silver Dollar City, where she discovered a passion for ride operations. "I fell in love with what I was doing and knew this was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life," she shares. Her career took a pivotal turn when she became an IAAPA Show Ambassador during college—a role that ignited her commitment to volunteering and industry engagement. "I haven't missed a show since," Claassen proudly notes. Now, in her safety-centered role, Claassen has learned to embrace the complexity and diversity of the industry. "Safety isn't just about rides; it's guest safety, employee safety, animal safety—every aspect of what we do," she explains. Claassen also leads with a desire to learn, even as a now-leader. "I am not the expert, but I surround myself with people that are experts and that help me with guiding our safety program." For aspiring attractions professionals, Claassen emphasizes the power of relationships. "When I started, the industry was very male-dominated, and I was often one of the only women in the room, and I was perfectly okay with that. They mentored me, they guided me, and I still have those relationships today," she says.

Fri Forjindam

Fri Forjindam, chief development officer and co-owner of Mycotoo, has forged a groundbreaking path in the attractions industry through what she calls "serendipity and unicorn magic." A former theater performer, Forjindam transitioned from waiting tables to an assistant role at a theme park design company, where she discovered the power of storytelling on a commercial scale. "That opened my eyes to the world of storytelling and theatricality beyond the stage," she shares. From there, she climbed the ranks, co-founding Mycotoo, which grew from a three-person operation to an award-winning global team.

Among her proudest achievements are her work transforming Paisley Park, Prince's estate, into a world-class destination, and spearheading partnerships with Netflix for the Stranger Things global tour. "We've built something that blends creative, business, and tech in a way that's both responsible and revolutionary," she says, reflecting on her company's unique journey. Forjindam also celebrates Mycotoo's hands-on innovation with projects like Dig It, a STEM-based indoor play space.

Her advice to aspiring attractions leaders? "You don't need to become a leader—you already are. Our stories, our life experiences, are our superpower," she emphasizes. Authenticity, lived experience, and a hunger to innovate are the qualities she believes set individuals apart. "People respond to emotional relationships and context, not just the bottom line. Bring who you are at your core, and that will make you indispensable."

Carolyn Franks

Carolyn Franks, creator of Gilly's World, transformed a run-down 1800s farm in San Juan Capistrano, California, into the thriving River Street Ranch Petting Zoo, blending rural charm with creative innovation. "I took it over and turned it into a children's petting zoo because in Orange County in Southern California, it isn't very rural. It's a place of glitz and glamour, and kids don't get to see pigs and cows and sheep and goats," Franks shares of her philosophy behind the natural attraction. The zoo's heartwarming mascot, Gilly the guinea pig—named after the farm's original owners, Gil and Millie Jones—quickly became a sensation. What started as a story on the Gilly's World website turned into a book, a plush toy, music, and even yielded a 2018 IAAPA Brass Ring Award. For newcomers to the industry, Franks emphasizes the importance of persistence and networking. "A friend of mine told me recently that most people quit at the 10-yard line, and you never really know where it [the end zone] is, so just keep going," she advises. Franks credits IAAPA as a pivotal resource, sharing, "I went to every seminar, took notes, and even learned how to host kids' birthday parties, which grew [at River Street] from one a weekend to 12." Her advice is simple but powerful: "IAAPA is all of us, and it's really what you make it."

Aamna Jalal

Aamna Jalal is the powerhouse head of global business affairs and strategic initiatives for New York-based marketing and event company Superfly. Known as a dynamic executive and advisor with more than 16 years of experience working across the global attractions industry, her ability to blend the technical with the creative has left an impact. From her contributions to the opening Warner Bros. World Abu Dhabi in 2018 to her involvement in music festivals, Dalal says she finds joy in navigating these diverse experiences. As a woman who has reached a high-level role in a rewarding, yet rigorous industry, she recommends that others looking to follow her path find a mentor. "In fact, find multiple mentors," Dalal emphasizes. "Find people that you admire. They don't have to be from any particular level of experience. You can find someone who's at the beginning or in the middle of their career, but make sure you surround yourself with people that can advise you and give you sound advice going forward."

Angie Judge

Angie Judge, CEO of a data company named Dexibit that aims to predict and analyze visitor behavior, is a New Zealander with a dream to transform visitor experiences. Judge was first intrigued by the attractions industry at a young age, sharing, "My mother used to take me to the museum every weekend to see the haka, an indigenous Māori dance and cultural performance. That memory stayed with me, inspiring my journey into the cultural and commercial attractions sector to do something meaningful with data." Her leadership philosophy is equally impactful, emphasizing community and mentorship. "Seeing people who've worked with us go on to start their own companies, build families, and achieve their dreams—it's incredibly special," she says. Judge also credits figures like Gail Evans, Disney's trailblazing chief digital and technology officer, for inspiring her, noting Evans' central role in Disney's creation of MagicBands and in facilitating the company's broader digital transformation. For women aspiring to leadership in the global attractions industry, Judge recommends cultivating diverse experiences. "This industry is incredibly multifaceted—tickets, memberships, exhibitions, food and beverage, technology. To lead effectively, you need to understand all these elements, including digital, even if it's not your background." She adds, "Frontline service experience is essential—it instills a sense of service that stays with you for life."

Lena Lee

Lena Lee, senior vice president of the Park Operations Division at Universal Studios Japan (USJ), began her career managing events and attractions for the NBA. That experience led her to join the opening team at Universal Studios Singapore as part of its VIP and events division and sparked a passion for theme parks.

"It opened my eyes to a new world of possibilities beyond events and tours. Taking on leadership roles and facing the challenges of a park opening taught me resilience, adaptability, and the importance of team collaboration," she says.

Lee explored the casino and esports industries before returning to traditional sports, delivering large-scale, pre-season soccer tours across Asia. "These diverse experiences ultimately brought me to Osaka, where I lead operations at USJ. I've been fortunate to work with inspiring leaders and have had unique opportunities."

Safety is non-negotiable for Lee and underpins every decision she makes. She also empowers team members to make decisions. In an industry that thrives on creating fun and memorable experiences, she strives to ensure that "guests and team members enjoy and cherish their time with us."

"Give every opportunity a chance and believe in your ability to lead and make a difference," she says.

Elizabeth Lugo

Elizabeth Lugo is chief operating officer at Grupo Xcaret, a leader in sustainable and socially responsible tourism and recreation in Mexico. She began working with the company in 1996, presenting a proposal for Xel-Há Park, which was joining the group. "Initially planning to stay for three months, I ended up staying for 29 years," she says. "I fell in love with the people, the place, and the company's vision."

Lugo, who grew up and studied in Mexico City and the United States, called arriving at Quintana Roo a profound experience. "I saw illiterate people working with great enthusiasm at Xel-Há Park. The company launched the Zero Educational Backlog program, ensuring employees completed elementary education. This transformation deepened my commitment to Grupo Xcaret and its values," she says.

"I am proud to contribute to the mission of sharing Mexico's culture with the world, welcoming over four million visitors annually. It's a privilege to represent Mexico and witness our positive impact on many lives."

Lugo's leadership is based on preparation and discipline, the constant pursuit of opportunities, and passion for her work. She strives to "make decisions that benefit the company and respect people's well-being."

Technology's potential to transform our lives enthuses Lugo. "I'm excited about Grupo Xcaret's innovations and adaptability," she says.

Her career advice: "Aim for high performance, be professional, inclusive, and open to learning. Both men and women bring valuable perspectives to the table."

Victoria Lynn

Victoria Lynn's mission is to make people fall in love with Drayton Manor again. "It's all about epic family fun and our 75-year legacy! With consumer confidence soaring, this year is about showcasing the amazing experiences and investments that have happened in the park over the last five years," she says.

Lynn took over as Drayton Manor's managing director in 2022 after a 25-year career that included roles at Wild Wadi Waterpark, Ferrari World Abu Dhabi, and Dubai Holding Entertainment.

"I knew I could make a difference here, helping to deliver higher levels of service and implementing a great investment plan—we have introduced two new lands and seven new attractions in three years." Last Christmas, the park launched an accessible grotto for SEND (special educational needs and disabilities) children. "I had guests seeking me out crying because they were so overwhelmed by the experience that their child could enjoy for the first time. It made my year to see that positive reaction."

Earlier in her career, under the guidance of Glenn Davidson, Lynn saw how valuable training was to an organization. She remains committed to training and quality and to driving the business. She wants to pave the way for others to reach the top. "Always be your best. If someone says you can't, show them you can!"

Genevieve Norris-Brown

Genevieve Norris-Brown, general manager of Seabreeze Amusement Park in Rochester, New York, is a sixth-generation leader continuing her family's legacy in the attractions industry.

"I attended my first IAAPA Expo when I was just 3 months old," she shared. "So, we're at year number 38."

Leading the fourth-oldest operating amusement park in the country is a point of pride for Norris-Brown, who emphasizes the importance of maintaining her family's storied history. "Becoming the general manager in a sixth-generation family business is an accomplishment that speaks for itself," she says.

Her journey saw support by mentors like Jane Cooper and Denise Beckson, whom she credits with teaching her resilience and perseverance. "They encouraged me to keep pushing, even when I wanted to give up, and to stand firm in what I believe," she says.

For aspiring leaders, Norris-Brown stresses the value of mentorship and networking. "Find another woman to mentor you," she advises. "The women I've met in this industry have been invaluable, and everyone is so friendly—don't be afraid to put yourself out there."

Ros Pullen

"I am hooked—I love the industry, the people, and the experiences I have been fortunate to have," says Ros Pullen, general manager of Raging Waters Sydney. Pullen is the current and first female president of the Australian Amusement, Leisure and Recreation Association (AALARA). She brings extensive knowledge in marketing, strategy, partnerships, and guest and team member experience, gained during a 20-year leisure career in public and private attractions.

"This all came from challenging myself and saying 'yes' to opportunities. The fun part is learning along the way," she says.

Pullen creates "a strong, positive culture of safety, learning, and fun" at the Raging Waters Sydney water park. While the attractions industry inevitably faces challenges, she believes agile companies can rethink their business strategies and succeed. She focuses on "asking the why: 'Why am I doing something? What am I hoping to achieve? Who will be impacted? And in what way?'"

Pullen aims to build on AALARA's "strong foundations of connection, collaboration and shared knowledge" and further strengthen the association's partnership with IAAPA in the Asia-Pacific region—and globally.

"Be open to all the possibilities this industry can offer," she says. "Everyone's journey will be different, so don't compare yours to anyone else's."

Sarah Roots

Sarah Roots, executive vice president of Worldwide Studio Tours and Retail at Warner Bros. Discovery (WBD), believes she has the best job in the world. "My role with Warner Bros. Discovery is amazing, leading the opening and operation of the highly successful Warner Bros. Studio Tour London and subsequently expanding worldwide with Warner Bros. Studio Tour Hollywood, Warner Bros. Studio Tour Tokyo, and shops in London and New York. It's been exciting to work globally on new Harry Potter experiences, driving innovation and creating opportunities for our team."

Starting out, her aim was "to work in a dynamic, fun environment full of interesting people." Advice she received from a hotel manager early in her career stayed with her: "Always work for the brand and then work out the role." Roots moved into attractions, theme parks, and the museums and heritage sector before joining WBD.

"As I've progressed, I recognize the need to stand back and focus on making the best decision for the business. The right decision is not always the easy one. I collaborate with my senior team and listen to opinions and advice. I trust my team and I'm open with them. I love transparency."

She considers it a privilege to work with such a successful global IP. "We carefully consider everything we do to ensure it reflects our brand values and the integrity of the stories." 2025 will be a year of growth with two new Harry Potter shops launching in Chicago (April) and Harajuku, Tokyo (August). "While every culture is unique, the world loves Harry Potter!" she says.

Among the many highlights at WBD, Roots singles out her "amazing team" and the customers' response to the product. "I'm so proud of the feedback we receive. World-class visitor reviews are not magic! They reflect the team effort."

Bianca Sammut

At age 18, Bianca Sammut began working for Australia's Wonderland as a ride operator, a role that ignited a lifelong passion for creating memorable experiences for others. She has embraced every opportunity to learn and grow, with a career spanning three continents and cultures.

"I moved on to the Sydney Attractions Group and Village Roadshow Theme Parks before taking an exciting leap to the United Arab Emirates as park manager at Yas Waterworld in Abu Dhabi," she says. Sammut's eight years in the Middle East culminated in her heading Yas Island Theme Parks. "In late 2023, I embarked on an exciting new chapter with Merlin Entertainments in the U.K., where I now lead the iconic Alton Towers Resort as vice president. It's been an extraordinary adventure, filled with challenges, growth, and immense gratitude."

Sammut praises the "remarkable" mentors and peers she has met. "Inspiration is everywhere, and building a strong network of role models has been invaluable," she says. Sammut has joined the IAAPA Young Professionals Mentor/Mentee Program, which focuses on nurturing the next generation of leaders. "I'm a firm believer in paying it forward. I'm eager to help our industry's rising stars thrive and succeed."

Following the 30th anniversary of Nemesis in 2024 and its triumphant return as Nemesis Reborn, Sammut will welcome another thrilling new ride—Toxicator—in 2025. "Our industry never stands still, and I'm always inspired by the innovation and creativity that continues to redefine guest experiences."

Cynthia Sharpe

Cynthia Sharpe, who serves as senior principal at live entertainment and events company TAIT, made an unconventional leap into the attractions industry after receiving degrees in molecular biology and genetics. Soon after matriculating, she realized that lab science wasn't her life's calling. "I ran screaming from academia," jokes Sharpe.

At the time, she serendipitously lived across the street from Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry—and landing a job at the renowned institution was her inauguration into the industry. Over the years, her experiences allowed her to reach new heights in her career at Thinkwell, acquired by TAIT in 2022. Among her many accomplishments, Sharpe is most proud of receiving the Roy Schafer Leading Edge Award for Non-CEO Leadership from the Association of Science and Technology Centers, stating, "That award meant a lot because it really recognized my body of work—not just in exhibit development, but how I helped museums and communities move the needle with inclusion, diversity, equity, access, and social justice."

To young professionals aiming for an attractions career, Sharpe advises, "Own your swagger. It's OK to say, 'I don't know, but I can learn.' Just don't overreach or take on more than you're ready for." She encourages aspiring leaders to take on a growth mindset as well: "Do your research, bring the receipts, and come back strong."

Cynthia Vergon

From her experience as a technical translator for gondola lift companies to her current role as a client relations lead for the Latin American arm of British design company Katapult, Cynthia Vergon has charted an inspiring, diverse, and unconventional path in the attractions industry. Starting in the natural attraction sector, she discovered her passion for themed entertainment, transitioning seamlessly into creative writing and project development. "I just fell in love with this industry," she recalls, describing her journey as "a convoluted way to get here, but that's how so many of us find our place."

Vergon's career is defined by adaptability and resilience. Whether contributing to projects like the Quake Experience at the Quake Museum in Lisbon or launching her own experience consulting company, Canopy Solutions, in Brazil, she has consistently combined her technical expertise and creative vision. During an 18-month journey through Latin America, she explored regional parks and their untapped potential, which she describes as a market with vast opportunities for growth in themed attractions. "My idea was to visit parks and understand what they do, how they do things," she says. "I saw the challenges they face and the incredible potential for improvement through theming."

Now based in Brazil, Vergon continues to shape the future of the industry while embracing the vibrant culture of her adopted home. As she puts it, "I call myself a Swiss Army knife—translating, creative writing, consulting, and helping Latin American parks build the skills to enhance experiences and theming. There's so much opportunity here, and I'm excited to be part of it." FW

Avery Matteo is the associate editor of Funworld at IAAPA. An Orlando-based writer and editor with more than four years of experience supporting educational institutions, nonprofits, and associations, she is honored to spend her days illuminating the people and experiences that make the attractions industry great. In her free time, she enjoys traveling to new attractions across the globe. Connect with her on LinkedIn:

Juliana Gilling, Funworld's contributing editor, began covering the global attractions industry in 1994. She reports on innovative people, projects, and additions for Funworld and the IAAPA News Hub. Juliana lives in the U.K., where she runs a freelance writing business. Connect with her on LinkedIn:

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Shoppertainment with a Splash

An insider's look at how Mexico's Acuario Michin CMDX brings conservation, education, and recreation to visitors

Story and photos by Michael Costello

WITHIN THE NEW PARQUE TEPEYAC SHOPPING MALL, in the heart of Mexico City, a traditional shopping experience with anchor stores, boutiques, restaurants, and dining courts is complemented by the 30,000-square-meter, four-level Acuario Michin CDMX—one of the largest aquariums in Latin America and the latest addition to the Michin aquarium family of attractions. The aquarium is a diverse, multifaceted attraction that serves as a hub for conservation, education, and entertainment. The facility features two levels of aquarium exhibits—one level is a conservation center with lemurs, lizards, birds, and other species, while the other floor is devoted to family entertainment center (FEC) activities and attractions.

This unique family experience allows all ages to connect with nature, learn about sustainability, and play together. Rodrigo Alvarez, the visionary owner of Acuario Michin, shares with Funworld his insights into the process of creating the unique attraction, the challenges faced, and the mission that drives the facility forward one year after opening.

A Dream Realized in Mexico City

Opening Acuario Michin CDMX proved to be a long and ambitious project. According to Alvarez, the dream of bringing the Michin concept to Mexico City first began in 2013. With the timing and circumstances cited as not advantageous at the time, the team delayed groundbreaking in Mexico City.

Meanwhile, the first Michin Aquarium opened in Guadalajara in April 2017. The success of that initial location—combined with valuable lessons learned from visitors—paved the way for expansion.

In December 2019, a second location opened in Puebla within the Parque Puebla shopping mall. And finally, after years of planning and three years of construction, Acuario Michin CDMX in Mexico City opened on Oct. 16, 2023, marking the culmination of a decade-long dream.

Alvarez emphasizes that each new location builds upon the successes and lessons of the previous ones. "Every time it gets better," he says, highlighting the team's commitment to continuous improvement. By collaborating with experts and testing new concepts, the Michin team ensures each aquarium offers a unique and enriching experience.

The various aquariums and habitats of Acuario Michin are creatively curated for maximum interactivity.

A Mission of Conservation and Education

At the core of Acuario Michin's mission are five key objectives: rescue, conservation, investigation, education, and recreation. These pillars guide every aspect of the aquarium's operations, from exhibit design to staff training. Alvarez says the goal is not only to showcase marine life but also to instill a sense of responsibility in visitors, particularly children.

Acuario Michin is often approached by the local government to serve as a place of refuge for animals confiscated in illegal trade. Some animals—such as those found in a current exhibit of guinea pigs—find a permanent residence at the aquarium, while others are temporary residents until they can be returned to their natural habitats. This program is on display at the aquarium, and Alvarez believes its educational value cannot be overstated.

"We help plant a seed for the children so they can learn and defend sustainability," Alvarez says. The aquarium's approach to education is innovative and engaging, combining entertainment with learning. By making the experience fun and interactive with digital and physical components, Alvarez's team believes children are more likely to absorb important lessons about conservation and share them with their families.

FUNWORLD DIGITAL FEATURE
Learn more about Acuario Michin at **IAAPA.org/acuariomcdx**

TOP LEFT: Guests navigate a 180 degree tunnel at Acuario Michin.

BOTTOM LEFT: Lemurs interact in their habitat.

TOP RIGHT: Acuario Michin has learned that cultural perspectives resonate with guests and their families.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Many of Acuario Michin's displays are interactive to help younger guests make stronger connections with the content presented.

Excellence With Staffing and Training

Behind the scenes, the success of Acuario Michin is driven by an on-site team housed inside the attraction's administrative space. Day-to-day business, such as marketing, sales, and other administrative functions, is carried out here.

Alvarez explains that from the beginning, the company has operated under a specific organizational framework, which includes committees that help dictate decision making in finance, construction, and operations. This structure allows the team to focus on their shared goals of conservation and education. "From day one, we were able to get help from many people that know more than us from different enterprises, and by listening to them, we were able to create the Acuario Michin concept," says Alvarez. "And then we learn that the most important thing that Acuario Michin has is the people." Alvarez emphasizes the importance of empowering staff to take ownership of their roles.

Training is a continuous process at Acuario Michin. The team collaborates with international organizations like the Dallas Aquarium, San Diego Zoo, and SeaWorld to stay at the forefront of best practices. Veterinarians and other specialists receive ongoing training to ensure the highest care standards for the animals.

Michin says its focus of fostering a culture of collaboration and innovation contributes to the aquarium's delivery of exceptional experiences and commitment to conservation goals.

Engagement Through Entertainment and Education

One of the standout features of Acuario Michin is the attraction's ability to engage children and families in a meaningful way. Alvarez and his team are aware that today's children are accustomed to instant gratification and therefore have shorter attention spans. To meet the needs of this key demographic, the aquarium incorporates interactive and physical activities that keep children captivated while also encouraging engagement with their families.

The entertainment aspect is carefully designed to complement the educational mission. For example, digital exhibits and hands-on activities allow children to learn about marine life and conservation in an engaging and memorable way. By combining fun with education, the aquarium ensures that visitors leave with a deeper understanding of the importance of protecting the planet.

Alvarez is grateful for positive guest

feedback from families with children who visit Acuario Michin. "When they say to their parents, 'Please, bring me back,' we know we are doing something right," he says.

Another first for the company is its FEC component that occupies the top level of the building. Attractions include trampolines, laser tag, a ropes course with suspension bridges, climbing walls, roller skating, bowling, axe throwing, and a counter service restaurant.

Challenges and Lessons

The Michin team has faced its share of challenges when launching the attraction. One notable example involved a giant octopus exhibit. While this species is a popular one in the United States, the team discovered that maintaining the precise temperature conditions required for the octopus was difficult in Mexico due to frequent power outages. Even a brief fluctuation in temperature could negatively impact the animal's well-being.

Rather than compromise their commitment to animal welfare, the team made the difficult decision to discontinue the exhibit. "Our main goals are to preserve, conserve, and free the species we work with," Alvarez explains. This dedication to ethical practices underscores the aquarium's mission.

Another challenge was understanding the preferences of Mexican visitors. Early market research for the Guadalajara location relied heavily on international perspectives, which didn't fully align with local expectations. Over time, the team learned to listen more closely to Mexican audiences, leading to the integration of entertainment elements that resonate with families. This adaptability has been key to the aquarium's success.

Inspiring the Next Generation

As Acuario Michin CDMX operates in its second year, the team remains focused on its mission to inspire and educate. Alvarez believes that the key to a sustainable future lies in engaging children and teaching them the value of conservation. By creating a space where families can learn and grow together, the aquarium is planting seeds of change that will benefit future generations.

One of the unique features of Acuario Michin is the focus on Mexican culture and biodiversity. This enables the aquarium to showcase native species and ecosystems. This emphasis on local conservation also sparks engagement, allowing visitors to connect with the subject matter and exit the experience with a new mindset. FW

The top level of the Acuario Michin includes a mix of attractions that diversify the the aquarium's offerings and increase length of stay.

Innovation Takes Flight

How the San Antonio Zoo prepares for the future

by Michael Costello

SAN ANTONIO ZOO

The San Antonio Zoo's front gate, added in December of 2023, welcomes guests in a fresh and exciting way.

Driving through the sprawling 349-acre Brackenridge Park, located just north of downtown San Antonio, visitors find themselves in an idyllic scene of sprawling meadows, winding trails, picnicking families under mature oaks, Japanese tea gardens, century-old stone buildings, and ducks gliding across tranquil waters. As the road winds through the north end of the property, traffic stops to let a miniature train cross the road before it heads into the city park's expansive landscape.

Here, The San Antonio Zoo awaits. Upon arrival, a towering new entrance gate—added in December of 2023—welcomes guests and serves as one of the latest and most visible upgrades to the 111-year-old facility. The previous entrance gate, added in the 1950s, was replaced with one that sets a better tone for the beginning of the guest experience, in addition to a host of benefits that enhance accessibility, inclusivity, and the overall visitor experience that The San Antonio Zoo is proud to share with Funworld.

A Legacy of Innovation

While habitats at zoos, aquariums, and museums are becoming increasingly interactive, the San Antonio Zoo traces its first cageless habitats back to 1929— the first instances of United States zoo visitors seeing animals outside of crates. Many of the zoo's habitats are connected by a moat system that allows the animals to be visible without bars or cages, in their habitat, as visible as possible to guests. "We were blessed that we are built in an old rock quarry, so we have all this beautiful limestone to create these habitats, more natural like it is in the wild," says vice president of marketing, sales, and communication, Hope Roth. The zoo's habitats are also designed with conservation and education in mind.

In October 2024, the zoo opened its new Naylor Savanna, the expanded home of the facility's giraffes, zebras, ostriches, sitatunga, and more species of African wildlife in a sprawling, naturalistic habitat that allows the animals to roam freely while guests can enjoy up-close encounters and interactive opportunities. The Naylor Savanna doubles the habitat's previous space and includes a new, state of the art giraffe barn that allows the zoo to participate in the Species Survival Plan's (SSP) Giraffe Breeding Program within the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA). The new giraffe barn includes individual giraffe rooms, a large family room, and a VIP encounter space for guests.

A key component of the Naylor Savanna is the Spekboom Lodge—a luxury suite that provides guests the opportunity to sleep overnight at the zoo, close to the animals. The Spekboom Lodge opened in November 2024 with room for up to four guests. Included is a primary bedroom with a king bed, a living area with two twin beds, an outdoor patio, and a kitchenette. Included in a stay at the lodge is exclusive zoo access up to two hours after closing and an hour before opening, and complimentary access to zoo animal interactions and encounters. Always keeping conservation in mind, the zoo donates a portion of lodge revenue to the Giraffe Conservation Foundation (GCF), the only global organization dedicated to ensuring the survival of giraffes.

Rooted in Education and Conservation

With all the new improvements, upgrades, and innovations coming, the zoo understands the importance of keeping hallmark features as constants. Visitors will notice botanical gardens, grand shade trees, and historic structures all

SAN ANTONIO ZOO

throughout the facility, many constructed of stone. One such structure is what serves as the unofficial backdrop to the new entrance plaza—the zoo's historic monkey house. The ornate stone structure with a Spanish tile roof dates to the mid-1930s and was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2024.

The San Antonio Zoo is more than an attraction—it's fulfilling an educational mission. At the forefront is the Will Smith Zoo School, the largest nature-based preschool in the nation. With 240 students from more than 60 zip codes, this innovative program immerses children in outdoor learning 70% of the time, regardless of weather. Unlike a typical field trip, these children are on-site daily, developing a deep connection to nature and conservation. Scholarships for tuition assistance ensure accessibility, and the school's mission is clear: inspire the next generation of conservationists through unmatched education.

The zoo's commitment to conservation extends far beyond its gates. Proceeds from every ticket sale directly supports wildlife conservation projects across six continents, from saving Texas horned lizards to protecting rhinos, jaguars, and giraffes. The zoo also plays a critical role in rehabilitating rescued and endangered animals, working closely with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to provide care for animals confiscated from illegal pet trades. Some species that are virtually extinct in the wild have a home here where staff breed and grow the population for eventual release back into their natural habitats.

At home in San Antonio, where the state reptile, the Texas Horned Lizard has been at risk, the zoo leads conservation efforts that focus on habitat restoration, breeding, and reintroduction back into the wild, restoring populations in cooperation with local landowners. "We've had five reintroductions into the wild," says Roth.

> **"We haven't had gorillas in 30 years here at San Antonio Zoo, but it's because of visitors, it's because of guests, it's because of donors that we're able to bring them back and reintroduce them to our community."**

Already announced for a late 2025 opening is what is to be one of the largest gorilla habitats in the nation—Congo Falls. Breaking a 30 year absence of gorillas at the San Antonio Zoo, the habitat will open with a bachelor troop of four silverbacks that will live together, and a family group of one silverback and three females that are all part of the SSP. "That is so exciting because it's unheard of and that really speaks volumes to the habitat that's been created," says Roth.

Another announced feature of this new exhibit is a more than 60 foot tower that gorillas will be able to climb in guest view, serving as a jungle gym. Roth tells Funworld the tower with climbing gorillas will be visible to freeway motorists outside the zoo while guests inside will enjoy 360 degree views at ground level, via a walkway netted in the air that allows guests the ability to walk above the habitat, and from The Ralston which is a 500 guest capacity event center that will overlook the new Congo Falls and Naylor Savanna, along with unobstructed views of the San Antonio skyline. The Ralston event center was made possible by a donation from the Ralston Family Foundation's $10 million donation—the zoo's largest single donation from a single individual.

MICHAEL COSTELLO

Getting Creative and Driving Revenue

While the zoo operates a two-mile long miniature railway attraction that sits just outside of the perimeter of the zoo and meanders through Brackenridge Park, a full-sized carousel with a menagerie of unique animal figures from Chance Rides operates inside the zoo. The facility also owns and operates the historic Kiddie Park attraction, which is another hallmark of the area since 1925. In 2019, the zoo acquired the amusement park's dozen vintage rides and moved them to a spot near the zoo's front gate. When former ownership of Kiddie Park was looking to close, the zoo saw this as an opportunity to preserve the oldest children's park in the United States and harness yet another viable offering for the larger complex that increasingly looks to diversify its offerings.

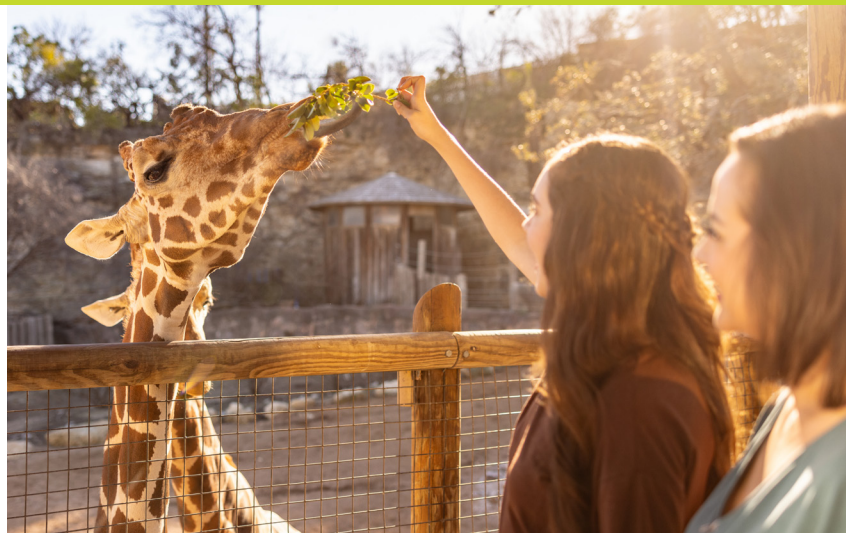
Situated atop the new front gate is the Fiesta Terrace. It provides views of the zoo and surrounding landscape while it provides another profit center for the facility.

MICHAEL COSTELLO

Dubbed the "Valentines Day Capital of the World," San Antonio Zoo harnesses the power of creativity, social media, and public relations.

Meanwhile, the new Fiesta Rooftop Terrace at the zoo's entrance offers stunning views of the zoo and Brackenridge Park, including the nearby lemur sky trail within the new entrance plaza. This versatile space serves as a lounge during spring break and is a robust profit center. It regularly hosts weddings, banquets, and meetings, supported by in-house catering.

Valentines Day events geared towards singles and couples returned. Cry Me a Cockroach was one such event that offered participants the opportunity to symbolically name a cockroach, rodent, or lettuce leaf after an ex, with the proceeds supporting wildlife conservation. The international media attention gained from the Valentines Day helps the zoo fulfill its mission. "All these funds raised while learning about animals in a fun way goes back to securing the future for wildlife," says Roth.



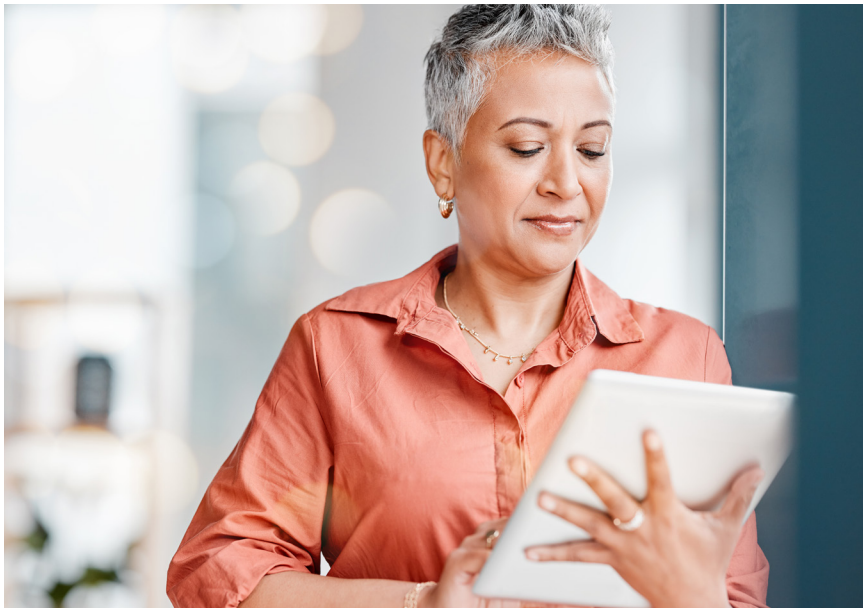
SAN ANTONIO ZOO

Coming Full Circle

The new front gate entrance is now fully ADA accessible, with the designation as sensory-inclusive through KultureCity—a nonprofit organization which trains staff at venues and certifies attractions that have implemented sensory inclusive modifications. The zoo raised the gate 12 feet above street level to address uneven terrain.

The welcome experience is now streamlined with digital ticketing and ample space just inside, eliminating the street-side queues of the past. Visitors are greeted by a vibrant atmosphere reflecting San Antonio's culture, complete with a new gift shop, fountains, and the iconic brass lion statue beloved by generations of zoo visitors. Two other standout features of the new entrance gate plaza are flamingos and the lemur sky trail, where lemurs roam above the entrance in net tubes, delighting guests while introducing energy and interactivity continuing a tradition the San Antonio Zoo has done for over a century. FW

The new Naylor Savanna allows guests to have up-close encounters with animals in their habitats.



Smarter Park Operations

Park operators begin to see the benefits of new technologies

by Juliana Gilling

CAN TECHNOLOGY MAKE ATTRACTION OPERATIONS MORE EFFICIENT? This question brought together Adrian Thompson, regional vice president of improvement and planning at Merlin Entertainments; Owen Jones, product director at CmdCentr; Ali Vahabzadeh, founder and CEO of Safari AI; and Angie Judge, CEO of Dexibit, at IAAPA Expo 2024 in Orlando.

Jones invites attractions professionals to "imagine a theme park or an attraction where information is trapped on paper." That is still the case at many attractions, where teams grapple with the inefficiencies and challenges that come with managing operations on paper. Merlin Entertainments aimed to change that at its parks and optimize ride operations.

Capturing the 'Ride' Stuff

Merlin wanted to capture real-time, accurate ride data, allowing management teams to make informed, in-the-moment decisions. Merlin approached CmdCentr for assistance with migrating from a paper-based, manual process for collecting ride information to a fully digital operation.

They started with CmdCentr's app. Ride operators could enter information into the app via a digital tablet at a ride instead of laboriously logging details on paper. The ride operator app covers 15 different operational processes. Merlin's and CmdCentr's teams worked closely to identify the data they needed to capture.

"We have a very collaborative relationship with Owen. We really went into detail, looking at all of our ride processes and what we wanted ride operators to record," Thompson says. The teams focused on testing, learning, and continuous improvements. "This has been an evolutionary process," Jones says.

Getting team buy-in was fundamental. Merlin's team analyzed their processes critically and decided what they needed to prioritize. Crucially, Merlin and CmdCentr teams looked at what they could do to solve problems, especially when people were involved. "How could we make the easiest thing to do the right thing to do?" Jones poses.

For example, Merlin's teams were keen to digitally record more data on ride downtimes. However, ride operators were selecting the wrong reasons for ride closures. It became clear there were too many options for them to choose from. "We put in place a two-tier closure system," Jones says. Operators could select a primary reason for closure—technical, cleaning, guest action, or weather—which would quickly alert the wider team. Then, the operations team could provide a secondary reason for the ride closure.

The digitization of ride processes proved been game-changing for oversight. The system gives teams a bird's-eye view of everything from wait times to dispatch rate to throughput and allows for speedier analysis.

"One of the most important things was putting that data in our managers' hands," Thompson says. "It's led to significant improvements for us as a company." The team now mines the data for patterns and actionable insights.

The Merlin park that piloted the system noticed a number of assistance requests for drinks from ride operators.

The project's benefits included real-time data at operators' fingertips, one additional ride per guest, a 30% increase in average ride throughputs, and improved safety. Merlin Entertainments now wants to use the app to digitize processes on a wider resort scale.

Ensuring Data Accuracy

Ride operators sometimes make mistakes when recording data, even with the app.

Merlin Entertainments turned to Safari AI to help it accurately track the number of people experiencing a ride in real time. Safari AI enables enterprises to leverage their IP cameras to measure the most important physical activity in their operation. In Merlin's case, Safari AI's Vision AI connects digitally to the park cameras and the CmdCentr app. Frontline staff and park teams can then view real-time data.

"Not only can we look dispatch by dispatch, but we can group them hour by hour to see how the attraction is trending throughout the day," Vahabzadeh says. Operators can quickly spot issues and course correct.

Thompson explains the technology identified that fewer than 90% of seats on one ride were filled. By bringing back a single-rider line, the team achieved a fill rate of over 95% and increased throughput.

Using AI for Actionable Insights

Dexibit helps attractions, such as Merlin's Legoland parks, to visualize and evaluate their data. "We can use AI to unlock new levels of value from this data," says Judge.

She shares the example of visitor voice, explaining that Dexibit's Large Language Models (LLMs) can help operators extract valuable information from visitor reviews to boost attendance, guest experience, engagement, spend, and efficiency.

AI tools can bring data together in one place for dashboards and reports. Conversational insights are another option—the technology can turn information into Q&A chats and provide prescribed actions. Combining visitor voice feedback with other data (e.g. crowding, wait times, and per cap effects) can be powerful.

Judge wants attraction operators to understand that AI is a mass of different technologies. "Make sure you're focusing on the problem you want to solve and then use the right technology to solve that problem," she says.

She talks about "being insight-inspired with data rather than data-driven because we still want to be in the driving seats ourselves." Judge encourages attractions to democratize data and involve all employees in the learning.

"Implementing technology is change, and that can be a challenge," Jones says. But Merlin Entertainments' transformation from a paper-heavy organization to a digital powerhouse shows how AI-human collaboration is helping to improve operational efficiency, reduce risk, and empower teams to make better decisions.

Six-year-old Matthew plays with the "Pump-N-Play" at the San Antonio Zoo's Will Smith Zoo School

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Adding Pizzazz

Small enhancements that make a big impact

by Juliana Gilling

LANDSCAPING. MURALS. FLAGS.

Each are a great way to enhance a visitor experience. Whether it be pops of color created by summer flowers or hand-painted murals, when strategically placed, these elements can create a vibrant sense of place.

Good design builds a return on investment (ROI), says Johnie Hampton of Hampton Creative. He believes a positive difference begins with a fresh pair of eyes. Hampton, joined Nate Olsen of Hampton Creative and Jerry Brick, director of construction at Palace Entertainment when reimagining the entryway into Kennywood amusement park in West Mifflin, Pennsylvania. The park's once-plain entry tunnel—which funnels visitors beneath a busy highway—now features brightly colored artwork reflecting the park's heritage. The new murals jog memories, start conversations between different generations, and heighten anticipation. The result?

"The guests love it," Brick says. The murals are an example of how environmental design can connect people to places and a simpler time. "Everything is a canvas," Hampton believes.

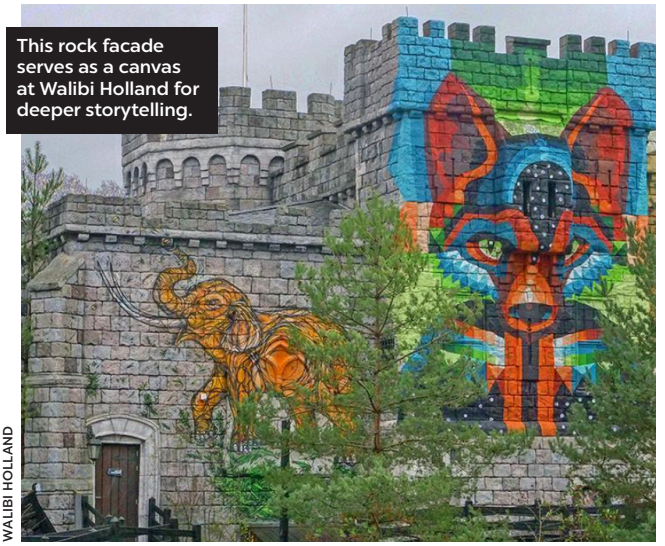
Rick Schuiteman, executive director of Fort Wayne Children's Zoo, transformed a concrete path leading to the zoo's African Journey experience into a vibrant jungle

Walibi Holland transformed their Main Street with colorful graphics.

WALIBI HOLLAND

5 Ways to Refresh and Renew—on a Budget

1. Paint and vinyl are powerful tools.
2. Everything can become a canvas.
3. Simple structures can create a sense of arrival.
4. New signage and colors can make a significant impact.
5. Treat budget constraints as a creative opportunity.



This rock facade serves as a canvas at Walibi Holland for deeper storytelling.

WALIBI HOLLAND

Walibi Holland's Wave Swinger sports bright new graphics.

WALIBI HOLLAND

walkway by using paint and vinyl. Paw prints on the ground now attract guests inside.

Schuiteman, who spent more than 30 years with SeaWorld, recalls how SeaWorld San Diego emblazoned a restroom with a giant image of a sea turtle. The display reinforced SeaWorld's conservation mission, reminding visitors that single-use plastic bobbing in the ocean is a concern that they can help solve by their own future actions. The restroom's exterior now features a water bottle refill station. The placement enhances the message of using refillable beverage containers.

Olsen encourages decision makers to create visual landmarks. He says attractions can't go wrong when adding striking features above visitors' heads—not just at eye level—so icons can be seen when venues become crowded. Attractive backdrops with prominent logos can also serve as a marketing boon when guests snap Instagrammable images on their smartphones.

In the Netherlands, Walibi Holland, located east of Amsterdam, began a "festivalization" of the park in 2018. Paint and modern graphics refreshed the look of the park's Main Street. Meanwhile, Merlin's Magic Castle received a brightly painted mural placed on its stone façade when Walibi Holland added the neighboring Wilderness section. Even the park's Zierer-made Wave Swinger received a bold look last season with new graphics.

Design tweaks can also propel profits at food and beverage outlets. At Lake Compounce in Bristol, Connecticut, the dated Parkside Diner looked forgotten. With new rustic theming and a new name—the Timberjack Chowhouse—keeping in its surroundings, the location became one of the park's best performing F&B facilities with a 35% increase in revenue. As for the menu? It barely changed. The increase in sales is attributed to the new aesthetic.

Another Palace Entertainment attraction, Adventureland located in Altoona, Iowa, identified a need for a candy store. The park brightened an existing building and rebranded the location as The Sweet Boutique. The new design presented a sweet reward. "We doubled that stand in terms of per cap," Brick says.

"Beautiful, well-crafted places are essential not only to people and communities, but also to economies," Hampton concludes. FW

Information presented in this Funworld Business Resources article came from Environmental Design On A Dime: Reimagining The Guest Experience With High Impact, Low-Cost Solutions, an IAAPA Expo 2024 EDUSession presented in Orlando. Make plans to participate in IAAPA Expo 2025 taking place Nov. 17-20 at the Orange County Convention Center.

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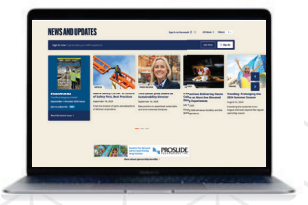

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by Paulina Reyes

Celebrating 15 Years of Growth and Evolution

THIS PAST OCTOBER, the IAAPA Latin America, Caribbean office celebrated its 15th anniversary, a milestone that fills us with gratitude and pride. I want to take this opportunity to thank every member around the world who supported IAAPA Latin American, Caribbean over the years. This milestone offers our team a moment to reflect on how we've stood alongside the industry, fostering growth and driving positive change across Latin America and the Caribbean.

I've seen how the industry has grown and evolved, witnessed the emergence of new leaders who innovate in their businesses, and recognized the hard work we have done with governments and organizations to improve the business environments and safety within attractions. With our members' support, we achieved international standards adoptions in many countries, such as Chile, Bolivia, Peru, and Mexico, and worked to support agreements and legislations advancing the cause. We helped secure the exemption of import taxes on attractions equipment through Mercosur—a South American trade bloc including Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay promoting economic integration and free trade—and also worked with the World Customs Organization to facilitate a change to the tariff classification for attractions equipment globally.

Over 15 years, membership has grown more than 50% and diversified. I've experienced the opening of many unique attractions that have emerged from the particular creativity that distinguishes the Latin American, Caribbean market. As we celebrate this milestone, it's clear that our industry is undergoing significant transformation. I see a dynamic future ahead—one shaped by innovation, resilience, and a shared commitment to excellence.

In alignment with this commitment, the IAAPA team in Latin America, Caribbean remains dedicated to delivering innovative resources, events, and education, as well as creating inspiring opportunities for our members to connect and continue improving their businesses. A highlight of 2025 will be the IAAPA Summit: Latin America, Caribbean, taking place in Mexico City from March 24-28. The event will conclude with a tour through Morelos and Puebla, offering attendees the chance to learn and network. They'll also experience some of the region's most distinctive and renowned attractions, such as the Michin Aquarium, Hasbro City, Aztlán Park, Jardines de Mexico, Africam Safari, El Rollo Water Park, and Inflalandia. We invite you to participate in all we have planned for your benefit in 2025.

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Thank you to everyone for your support during this journey, especially those members who volunteered throughout the years, everyone who provides feedback through our surveys, our members at large, and the regional team who works tirelessly with dedication and passion to achieve our mission: To inspire, grow, and protect the global attractions industry through member connections. We look forward to the next chapter of growth and collaboration for IAAPA in Latin America and the Caribbean. FW

Paulina Reyes is the vice president and executive director of IAAPA Latin America, Caribbean. She's fostered new connections in the global attractions industry for more than two decades. Connect with her at **PReyes@IAAPA.org** or on **LinkedIn**:

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for the Attractions Industry

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- **LEARN:** Access cutting-edge research, expert-led training, and a wealth of resources to fuel your professional growth.
- **ADVOCATE:** Be part of a powerful force shaping the future of our industry. IAAPA champions your interests, ensuring a thriving environment for years to come.

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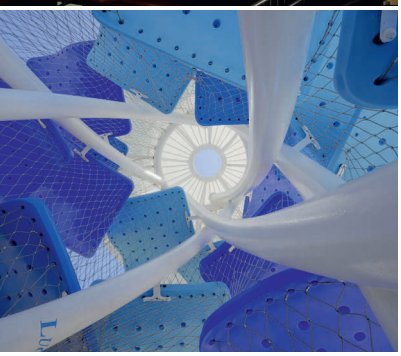

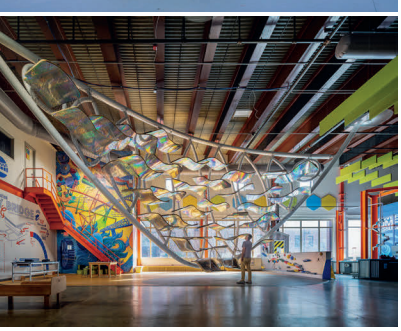

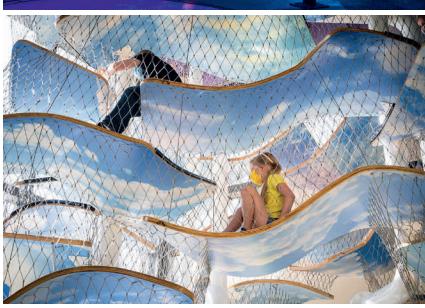

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